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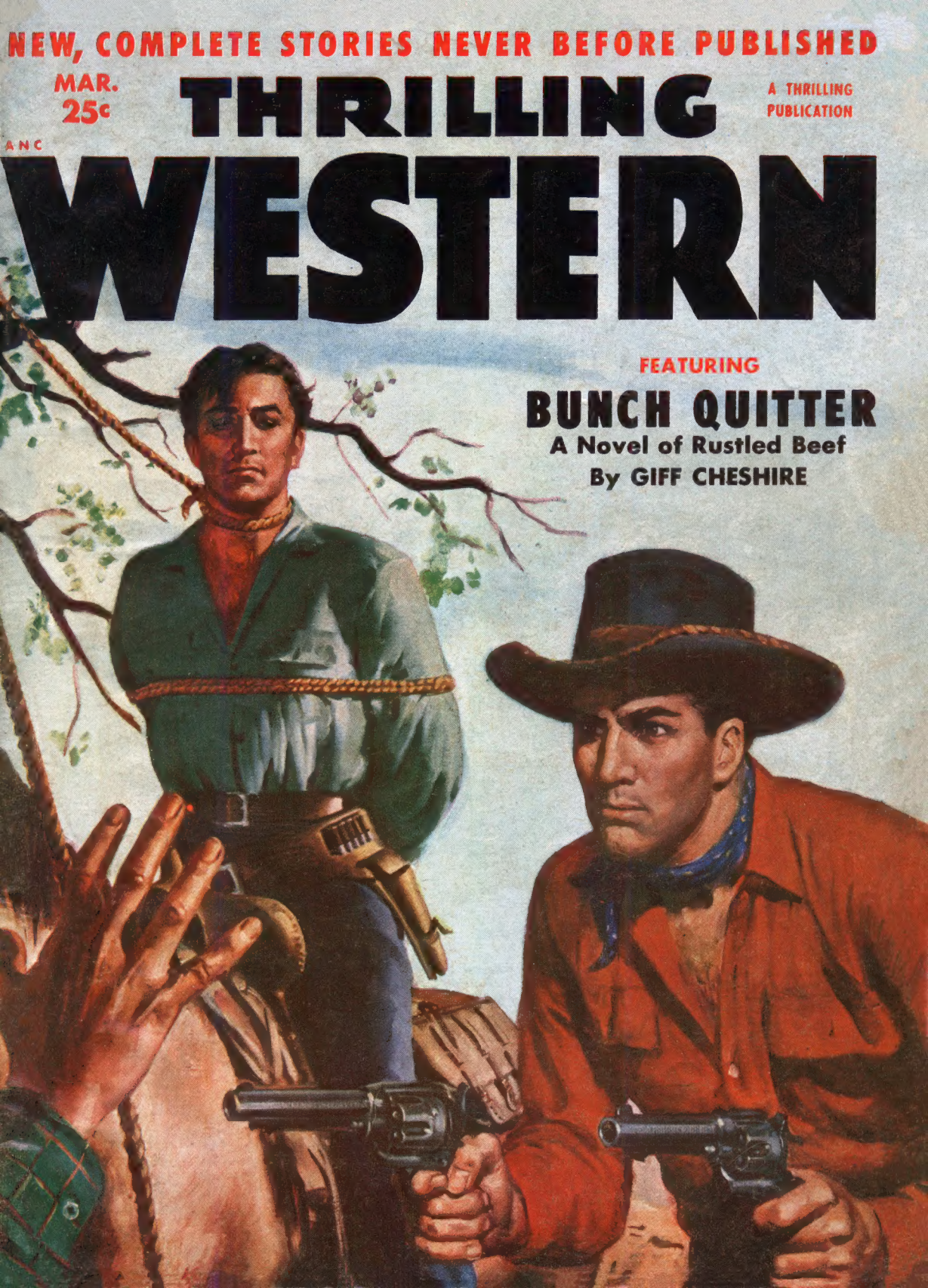

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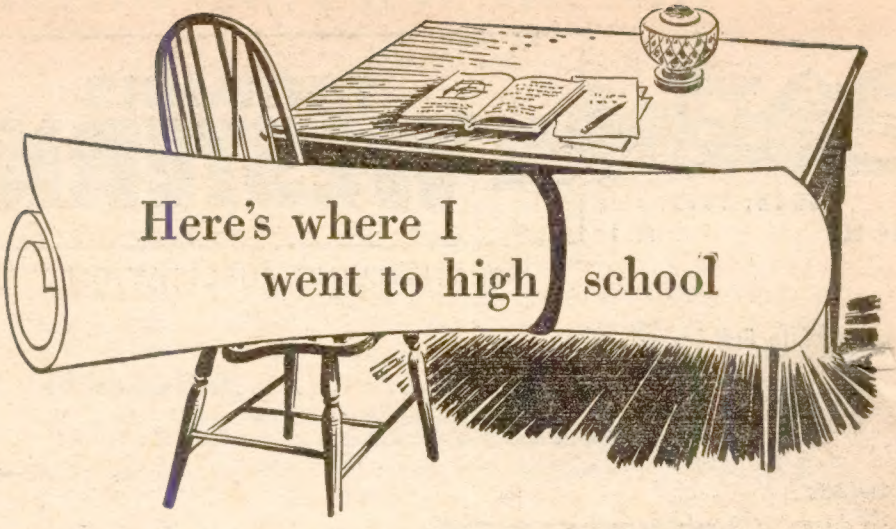


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MARCH, 1952
Vol. LXVI No. 1

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MORRIS OGDEN JONES, *Editor*

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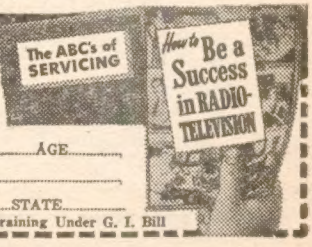

# Cannibal of the ROCKIES

## *A True Story of Colorado*

By RAYMOND COLWELL

SPRING is late in coming to the higher Colorado Rockies and means slushy snow and cold winds, muddy trails and hard going for man or beast. On such a day in early April of 1874, a man on foot made his solitary way along the trail down Los Pinos Creek in Saguache County. He stopped as he saw the rude log buildings of the Ute Agency scattered about the sagebrush flat in the distance. Looking furtively around him, he threw a cloth sack into the willows which covered the creek bottom, their branches just turning yellow as a promise of new green leaves.

As he dropped onto a bench in the Agency office, his first request was not for food but for whisky. Nearly exhausted, his clothes ragged, deepset eyes glittering from a frame of long black hair and matted beard, he presented a picture of suffering—except that neither his face nor his body was emaciated.

He told a story of hardship and privation to Stephen A. Dole, secretary to General Charles Adams, the Indian Agent, the general being absent on official business in Denver. He said that his name was Alfred Packer, and that with a party of twenty other men he had left Salt Lake City on the 17th of the previous November, headed for the gold fields of Colorado. After a rough time, they'd stumbled onto an encampment of Ute Indians at the mouth of the Uncompahgre River, in western Colorado, where they were fed and sheltered by Chief Ouray, always a friend of the whites.

Ouray begged them to stay there the rest of the winter, and warned them that it was almost certain death to try to cross the high mountains in the depth of winter. When the party insisted on going on, he gave them a little food from the tribe's meager stores, and directed them to follow up the Gunnison River to the government cow camp, where herds of cattle were kept for issue of rations to the Indians and where they could secure additional supplies.

Packer said he and five others became separated from the rest and turned up the Lake Fork of the Gunnison, directly into the wilderness of the highest mountains, instead of following up the main river to safety. The group with Packer consisted of an old man named Israel Swan, George Noon—nicknamed "California"—James Humphrey, Frank Miller—called "Butcher Frank"—and Shannon Wilson Bell.

Packer said he became lame and unable to travel and that the rest heartlessly deserted him and went on—to the San Juan settlements of Silverton or the Animas Valley, he thought. After a few days rest, he was able to proceed and had made his painful way to the Agency, living on what few rabbits and berries he was able to find.

Dole urged him to stay a while, saying that General Adams would be able to give him some work until Spring, but Packer seemed anxious to go on—back to his home in Pennsylvania, he said.

In a few days he left for Saguache, the nearest settlement, which was about forty-five miles distant. There he found nine men of the original party, who had heeded Chief

*(Continued on page 127)*

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# Masquerade on a Cattle Drive

## *A Saga of the Western Plains*

WILLIE MATTHEWS was the daughter of a South Texan who had driven cattle up the trails and settled in Caldwell, Kansas. Willie, as a child, listened to the thrilling stories of the drives that her father told, and she made up her mind that as soon as she was grown she was going up the trail even if she had to run off. And that is what she did.

S. D. Houston, a noted Texas trail boss, was having a difficult time in the spring of 1888 getting his herd north. By the time he approached Clayton, New Mexico, he was so short-handed he had to keep the herd bunched. He was told that there was a kid in town who wanted to connect with a herd. Houston found the kid at a livery stable. He gave his name as Willie Matthews. He admitted he had no experience, but he said he could ride and would make a good hand. Houston hired him on the spot.

Willie never disappointed anyone as a cowhand. Houston related that "the kid would get up the darkest stormy nights and stay with the cattle until the storm was over. He was good-natured, very modest, didn't use any cuss words or tobacco, and always pleasant. . . . He weighed one hundred and twenty-five pounds. . . . I was so pleased with him that I wished many times that I could find two or three more like him."

The big surprise came near a small town in northern Colorado. The kid came to Houston and said he would like to quit, that he was homesick. Houston gave him his pay and Willie rode off toward town.

About sundown, while the men were sitting around camp, Houston looked out toward town and saw a lady "all dressed up," walking toward the camp. When she approached him, Houston rose to receive his guest. Every man in camp was eyeing the unexpected visitor. Within a few feet of Houston, she began to laugh.

"Mr. Houston, you don't know me, do you?" she asked.

Houston was so astonished that for a moment he couldn't speak. Finally he managed to say: "Kid, is it possible that you are a lady?"

According to Houston, this was probably the most dumbfounded bunch of cowboys who ever went up the trail. No one could think of anything to say. They were too busy thinking about what they had already said along the trail in Willie's presence during the past four months. They were red-faced, but they liked Willie. And Willie was just as likable a lady as she was a cowhand.

Houston had the cook get a tomato box for a chair for Willie to sit on. And there she told her story—as fantastic a tale as any group of trail drivers ever listened to.

Willie told how she had borrowed clothing of her brother's, told him to tell her father she might be gone a week and for him not to worry about her, and rode off. She had ridden from Caldwell, Kansas, to Clayton.

The boys knew the rest. She told the gang she had enjoyed every bit of it. But now she was going straight home.

That night near midnight Willie boarded the east-bound train for home. And every man, except one left with the herd, was at the station to see Willie off.

As the train pulled out, Houston placed his hat back on his head and said: "She was a perfect lady." And the cowboys agreed to a man!

*—Ross Phares*

# BUNCH QUITTER

## CHAPTER I

### *Out of the Storm*

WALKING forward, Chance Ragan climbed to the passenger deck and paused for a moment by the rail. His hand, resting there, showed a detectable tremor. The same limp shakiness had attacked his knees. The task he had assigned himself had been put off again and again and could be delayed no longer.

The stern paddles of the *Inland Queen* had thrust her past Crates' Point. Ragan knew that Dalles City lay at the bottom of the sweeping return-curve of the river, some five miles upstream. Again he told himself he had to see Judd Kildane before the man lost himself ashore there. The trouble was, that Ragan had no wish to see Kildane.

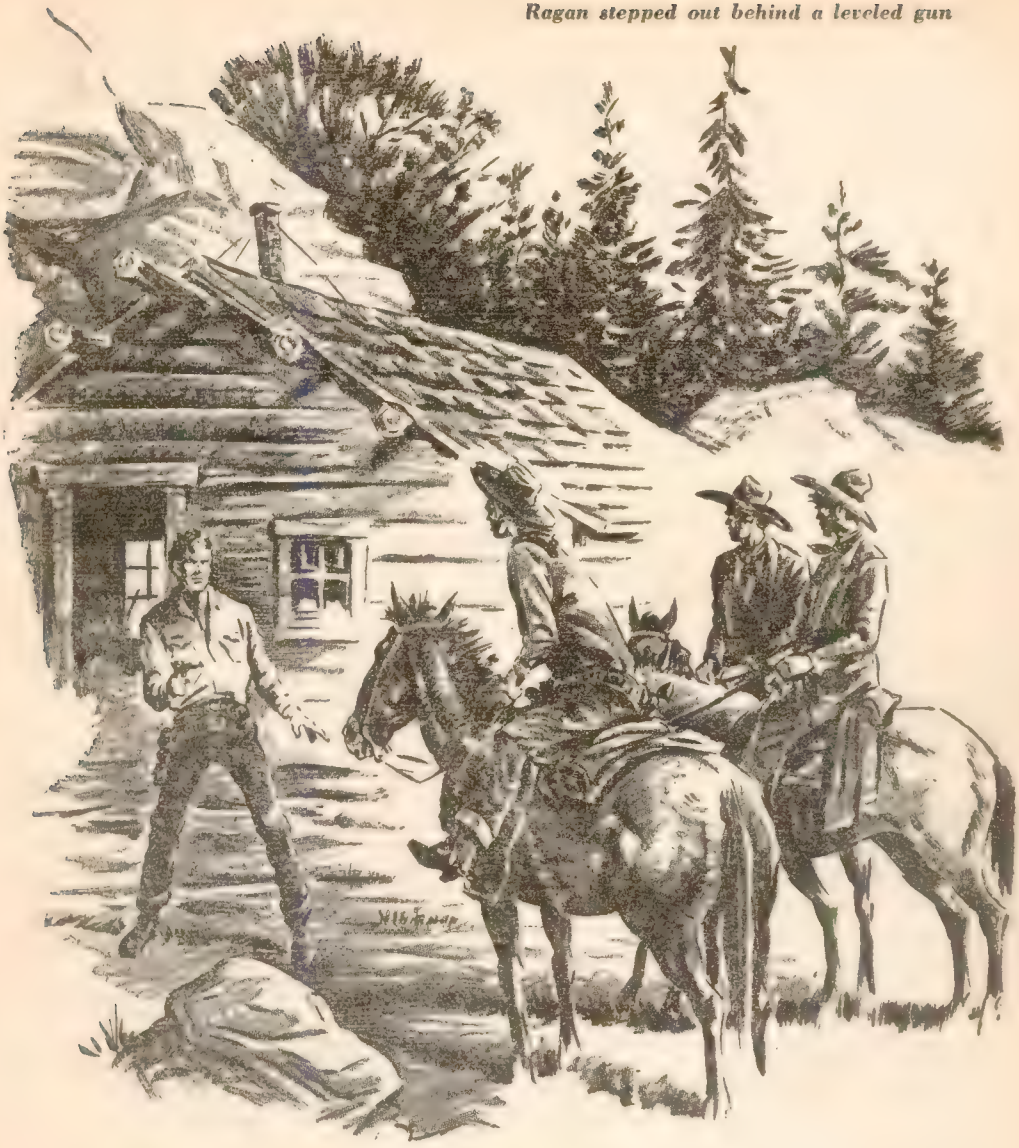
There had been fog in the long gorge of the Columbia, lying in thick patches that at times had blotted out the vaulting river cliffs and slants. The vapor fell behind now that the steamboat had broken out of the gut and come onto a new southerly heading. Ragan could see the sharp climb of the point and its tawny splash of autumn sunlight. It was the last headland of the Cascades. Eastward lay the cattle country, Ragan's country, home range.

Trying from long habit to conceal his limp, Ragan moved past two cabin doors and laid his knuckles brusquely on the third. A deep, drowsy voice bawled, "Who's that?" Ragan didn't answer. Yet it was like a splash of cold water when the door swung open, its frame limning the slim, supple shape of a girl.

The girl's brown eyes centered in pleased interest. Her generous mouth opened.

**A Novel by GIFF CHESHIRE**

*Ragan stepped out behind a leveled gun*



*High in the snow-clad Blue Mountains,*

*Chance Ragan had faced the bite of the elements—and*

*now, a year later, fortified by will-power*

*and patience, he was back to exact a toll from his betrayer*

# He Returned to Dallas City a Derelict, Bought

"Why, Chance!" she breathed. "Hello!"

It was the kind of voice that, in a man, might be called a whisky voice but which, in a woman, held richness and promise. Joy Kildane looked no different, Ragan thought, and she seemed genuinely glad to see him. Beyond her Ragan saw a man shove himself up on the cabin bunk, looking at Ragan with a sharp and probing interest. There was shock there. No one who had known the old Ragan could help but show it.

"Hello, Joy," Ragan said, his hand going to his hat and sweeping it back on his crisp black hair. He removed the hat slowly, still staring at her with more hunger than he had meant to show.

"Come in, Chance," Joy said pleasantly.

LIKE that and it was done. Now Joy Kildane had seen the ravage, the waste that was Chance Ragan. What he had dreaded, through all the months he had waited to come back, was now behind him. And Ragan felt nothing but the flatness that had been with him all the way along the river from Portland.

Judd Kildane lifted himself off the bunk as Ragan came in, and Kildane was grinning now and holding out his hand. It was a lean, brown hand, attached to a long, lean body. Judd's hair, his eyes, were the color of his sister's, but lacked the warmth of Joy's. Ragan had always noticed that, and did again.

"So you're going back," Kildane said. "To stay?"

"If I can find a job," Ragan said, and he shook Kildane's hand.

That hung an awkwardness in the air, Ragan noted. If anyone in the John Day Triangle had a job for Chance Ragan it would be Kildane. Kildane's Teeter outfit was the biggest, the most prosperous on the middle fork, which also had been Ragan's home range. But Ragan wasn't going to ask for that job. He couldn't bend his pride enough for that. It was for others, his old friends and acquaintances, to judge him and make the offer of work. That was the way Chance Ragan saw it, the way he had to let it ride because he wasn't much of a man, any more. A year's illness had left him broken and crippled, and word of that had long since come back to the John Day.

Ragan watched it at work now. Joy Kildane had moved over against the inside wall to make room for the two men. Observing her askance, Ragan saw a mute plea in her face as she regarded her brother. Ragan didn't like that. If there was a job on Teeter he wanted the decision to come wholly from Judd, who a year ago would have been glad to have Chance Ragan on his pay-roll.

The decision was coming from Judd, whose aggressiveness made him intolerant of prodding. He gave a wry grin.

"Your prospects are as fat as a hen's forehead, Chance," he answered. "I've laid off hands. Arch Terrebine's still buying our beef for the gold camps, and it cuts down the work. But won't Arch take you back in with him?"

Ragan shrugged. "Arch bought me out, lock, stock and barrel. Takes money to pay hospital bills. I had to sell. Do you know anybody needing riders?"

"Chance, I just don't."

That was all, but it had told Ragan what he needed to know. What Kildane had meant was that he knew of nobody who would want Chance Ragan for a rider, since Kildane himself did not. But Joy felt something for Ragan, maybe pity, or maybe a continuing respect for this relic of what once had been a superb specimen of manhood. This had been a test with Ragan, because he would not have gone to work on the Teeter, because of Joy Kildane's pity for him. It had been the bit of litmus he had thrust into the home situation to test its probable reception of Chance Ragan, the derelict who had been a year away from the John Day.

Kildane had no questions to ask about the year Ragan had been in Portland get-

ting patched up, getting back on his feet. Kildane stood in hung-jaw embarrassment, at a loss for talk. The awkwardness of it had brought a flush into Joy's cheeks. She tossed her head and gave Ragan a warm smile.

"I've got a million questions to ask," she said. "If you feel like talking about things."

"One of these times," Ragan said. "Seen you come aboard at the Cascades. Thought

CHANCE RAGAN

I'd say hello before this crowd busts up at Dalles City."

"Will you be taking the stage?" Joy asked.

"Buy me a horse, likely," Ragan told her.

JUDD KILDANE came out of it then. He squared his shoulders and put an affable grin on his bronzed face.

"Too bad you didn't make it earlier, Chance," he boomed. "Or that we didn't connect up in Portland. Joy's been on one of her buying sprees. And I had some business down there. Come over to the Teeter when you get settled, and we'll have a long visit."

"Sure," Ragan said.

For a second his eyes held Joy's and for that time the old longing was in them again. He let it show nakedly, then wiped it away. He didn't see now what once he had seen, a responding need in her. The strong, physical Ragan was gone and in his place stood a shadow man. She didn't feel it for him any longer, and this was the second question Ragan had wanted answered.

Ragan gave a casual grin, said, "See you up yonder, then," and took his leave. . . .

Dalles City lay in the arms of a vaulting rise. Capital of the eastern Oregon cattle country and transit point for freight and passengers to the Blue Mountain and Bitterroot mines, it was a brawling and noisy town cut off from everything but the river and the headland trails that ran to the east and south.

The *Inland Queen* slid in against the wharf boat. Her lines were thrown out, the gangplank run across. Ragan went ashore with the first push of hurried passengers, most of whom would stop overnight before taking the portage train for the Deschutes Landing and some upper river packet.

But Ragan was without haste. The John Day Triangle lay two hundred miles across the high desert. River passage came high, he lacked the money to buy the horse he had hinted at to Joy Kildane, and he lacked stage fare. But Ragan had learned patience. A man did when he had spent months flat on his back in a hospital bed, fighting gangrene and the fear of amputation because he had been frozen nine-tenths dead in a blizzard. Without patience a man like that never walked aboard a steamboat, or ashore again on his own legs, carrying his sparse possessions.

Chance Ragan was no stranger in Dalles City. Tramping along Front Street at his careful gait, he noted that the leaves of the sycamores, lifting over the roof tops, were

beginning to drop. Autumn's cool hint was in the sunshine that fell upon the headland behind the town. Now and then some man or woman he had known in a casual encounter in the past gave him a sign of recognition, a searching glance, a nod. Again and again he saw that look of shock.

When he reached Court Street, Ragan halted. Then, making up his mind, he went on along Front. There was activity all up and down the length of the thoroughfare, saddle horses at the hitch-racks and lazy teams slumped before wagons and hacks. The stage had rolled in from the east and stood importantly before the express office. There were red-shirted miners and blanketed Indians in the throngs knotted up and down the board walks. Chance Ragan moved among them hesitantly, something new in him, that flinching, that doubt of himself.

A man came hurrying along the walk toward Ragan, shouldering through the crowd, a man in waist overalls, scuffed boots and high-crowned hat. His gun and spurs bespoke the range, kindling in the tall, gaunt Ragan a sudden hot longing. The man looked up and nearly let his glance slide on past Ragan, then his eyes widened in recognition and a fast, warm grin spread over his brown face.

"Chance, you orey-eyed buckaroo! Why don't you let a man know when you head this way?" Pace Hanna, a stocky man whose dark hair was white at the edges, grabbed Ragan's hand and wrung it. "Chance, I got to see the land commissioner and I'm already late. But I've got a room at the Bradford. Meet me there in an hour, huh?"

"Sure," Ragan said, a replica of Hanna's smile wrinkling his own features into a response that felt strange to him.

Hanna let go Ragan's hand and rushed on. The smile lingered on Ragan's face. There went a man whose friendship could not be altered. The trouble was that Hanna was one of the two-bitters in the Triangle. He had never hired a rider and never would. But it was good that somebody was glad to see Chance Ragan coming home.

## CHAPTER II

### *The Man Who Bushwhacked*

THE Bradford was up the street, a less pretentious place than the Umatilla House, where Judd and Joy Kildane would stop to await the next day's stage to Canyon City on the John Day River. Ragan had the price of a room and decided to go on and register and wait for Pace Hanna. He owed a lot to Pace, who had saved him from the blizzard. Except for Pace's quick, knowing care, the doctors had told Ragan, he would certainly have lost his right leg and maybe his right hand or, more probably, would have died.

At the hotel Ragan signed for a room, accepted a key and mounted the stairs. He let himself into a stuffy, heat-trapping room and threw his slung roll and worn carpet bag onto the bed. He tossed his hat after the gear, then peeled off the coat of his cheap dark suit. Unlike Portland, which was beginning to take on airs, this was a good, shirt-sleeves town.

Ragan yawned, easing up for the first time and, for the first time, glad to be getting back.

He was napping when Pace Hanna rattled his door-knob, then walked in unbidden. Pace had a bottle of whisky under his arm and an extra glass. He placed these on the stand, pushed back his hat and said, "Figured you'd register here. Chance, I promised myself that the first thing I'd do, if I ever seen you again, was whip the hell out of you. Nancy wrote you two letters, and you ignored 'em. No man can do that to my girl."

Ragan grinned and held up his hands. "Around that time, Pace, I couldn't even hold a pencil in my fingers, let alone write with 'em."

But the fingers didn't show that now. The million times he had squeezed a rubber ball had restored their flexibility and his control of them. He could even pluck a six-gun and trigger it with something

like his old speed. He had practiced that at least a thousand times in a cheap hotel room in Portland, a thousand times seeing the featureless face of the man who had set him afoot in the Blue Mountains in that blizzard.

"Hell," Pace grunted, pouring whisky, "ain't they got nurses that'll write a letter for a man?"

"Pace, I was mixed up in my head. I still am."

"Maybe this'll loosen your tongue, anyhow," Pace said and handed Ragan a filled water glass of whisky.

Ragan's thin white fingers wrapped around the glass. It was a thing he could still do, had done too much in recent months in waterfront saloons in the big town. He sipped the good Sunnybrook Pace had brought.

"What could I tell you that you don't know?" Ragan asked.

"For one thing, who shot your horse out from under you."

"I don't know."

"You got an idea."

"Maybe," Ragan admitted.

"But you ain't talking," Pace said. "All right. You'll find out who and kill him, and that's why you come back."

"I've got to eat," Ragan retorted. "To eat, I've got to work. Punching cows is all I know. If I can get a job. Likely I can't. Judd Kilbane was on the *Queen*. He turned me down cold. Like the rest will. I don't blame 'em. There ain't a good day's work left in me. I know that. What's new up home, Pace?"

HANNA seated himself on the bed, took a pull on his whisky and said, "Not much has changed. There's still a mining boom, and there'll be a beef boom as long as it lasts. Arch Terrebine's still buying most of the Triangle cattle. Except mine. I won't sell to him."

In mild surprise, Ragan said, "How come? When I was doing the buying you sold to me."

"You ain't Terrebine."

"I was his pardner."

"That's right," Pace said. "But you still ain't Arch Terrebine. He's got a new buyer now. Angel Younts. That's one reason I won't do business with the Terrebine Meat Company. I'll drive to Wyoming with the Crooked River outfits. I'll do more work and take less money."

"Will you?" Ragan asked thoughtfully.

"You damn well know it, Chance." Hanna had emptied his glass. He cupped the glass in his hands and stared at it. "For one thing, it was a hell of a note the way Terrebine bought you out when you had to have money to pay doctor bills. Company's rolling in it now. He could have carried you along, and a white man would of."

"Maybe he wanted the business," Ragan said.

"You're damned right. That's exactly what he wanted. You heard much about that?"

Ragan shook his head. "Only what Nancy wrote. That Terrabine's singing big now. Got his own butcher shops, where we used to just buy from the growers and sell to the butchers and be contented with a little profit."

"He's got his own shops," Hanna agreed. "One in every damn mining camp in the Blues—Auburn, Canyon City, Baker, Eldorado, and all the other big ones. When he couldn't buy a butcher out, he run him out. And after he got his clutch, the retail price of beef nearly doubled. But not to the growers. Smell anything in that?"

Regan whistled. "A price-gouging monopoly, huh?"

"That's right. Them poor damned placer miners work hard. They need meat. They'll pay to get it. Arch Terrebine sees they pay plenty. But he passes none of that on to the stockmen."

Reaching for the whisky, Ragan tipped a little into his glass. He threw this against the back of his throat and let it wash down. He said, "You're trying to tell me something you don't want to say right out. That took planning, which must have been going on while I was still Terrebine's partner. It took money, which we didn't have between us, back there. Terrebine's took on Angel Younts to do his buying, while

I wouldn't have tolerated Younts. Angel's got gall and every crooked trick in the book, but he ain't got any money. In other words, there's been changes I wouldn't have stood for. Therefore, Terrebine was happy to buy me out."

"And he's happy things worked so he could," Hanna murmured.

"Gratified, you might say?" Ragan asked softly.

"That the bushwhack worked, even if it didn't kill you?" Hanna asked. "Chance, you're saying it. Not me."

"That's right," Ragan said, grinning. "I figured it out myself."

Pace Hanna rose then, saying he had other business to do in Dalles City. At the door he said, "See you on the stage tomorrow?"

Ragan shook his head.

Hanna looked at the floor, then up at Ragan. "Busted, Chance?" he asked casually.

"That's right. Thanks, Pace, but leave me work it out myself. That's how it's got to be."

"Sure," Hanna said. "You'll get there, and I'll see you. So long till then." The man went out.

RAGAN stared at the door for a long while. Hanna had only confirmed suspicions that had nagged Ragan's mind for months. Slowly Ragan's sharp face lost the geniality put there by the visit with his old friend and neighbor. Again he relived the evening when the trouble had come to him. High in the snow-clad Blues. He had been coming over the hump from Auburn, where he had delivered a market cut of steers. He had climbed into snow, and as he had descended into the Triangle it had been into continuing and heavier foul weather.

Still short of Susanville, which had been Ragan's destination, a rifle shot from a nearby ridge had dropped his horse. There had been no warning, nothing in recent events to prompt Ragan to caution. It was primitive country, inhabited only by a few moonshiners who sold their cheap whisky to the miners.

For a while Ragan had believed that he had been mistaken for somebody else. He had proceeded afoot, the closest place he could hit for being Hanna's little Ladder spread on Wildcat Creek. Long before Ragan got there a white curtain had wiped out all landmarks. Hanna had stumbled onto Ragan the next morning, two miles short of the spread, unconscious, as good as dead.

Ragan had only a febrile, disconnected memory of the rest. He must have kept going until only a short while before the storm blew over and Hanna, taking a look at his stock, found him there in a drift. Hanna had known what to do for frostbite and had done it. But this had been too severe a case for Pace Hanna. He had taken Ragan by sleigh to Susanville, where the doctors had promptly sent him on to Dalles City, where yet another doctor had placed him on a steamboat and hurried him to Portland.

The worst came after that, and Ragan's skin turned clammy as he remembered the weeks in which he had fought the doctors, senselessly but to a standstill. They had sworn, and justifiably, that his right leg and arm had to come off to save his life. Ragan had sworn to kill the man who touched him with a knife. They had given it up, baffled, disgusted but impotent. And from somewhere Ragan's iron will had drawn healing.

Weeks, months later he had been back on his feet. A whole man. All there. But the ghost of a man, at that, for something had been sapped out of him. What had been a six-foot man of a hundred and eighty pounds was now a six-foot man weighing a hundred and forty. There was, to Ragan, a ghastly difference. To a man whose life was action, whose living depended on muscles and stamina, there was a difference. He couldn't come back beyond that state and maybe never would, but he was going home to try.

The point, the nagging, corroding crux was that somebody had known he would be coming back over that particular trail and at about what time. The place of the shooting had been a long way from Au-

burn, but not far from the Triangle side.

And Arch Terrebine had made a surprising number of changes, once he had the business to run as he pleased!

## CHAPTER III

### *Broken Cords*

CHANCE RAGAN arrived in Canyon City on the bull-plank of Barney Callahan's freight wagon. Six days of burning sun, of limitless plateaus and astounding gorges, brought Ragan home to the John Day Triangle. For seventy hours he worked Callahan's brake, heard his swearing, took his amiable abuse. He roused from drugged sleep at nights to move picket pins, he spanned up the teams in the morning and unspanned them at night. His sweat runneled the alkali dust coating his face, but he began to feel useful and capable and good.

At the Canyon City wagon yard, Callahan said, "You more than earned your fare, Ragan. Come on. I'll buy."

"Sure," Ragan said. He caught up his roll and grip and tramped out with the freighter to the street.

The town stood on the high bank of Canyon Creek at the narrows of its gorge. Miners' pack animals and buckaroos' cow ponies choked its single, teeming street. Ragan drank with Callahan in Steamboat Smith's saloon, declined an invitation to make a night of it, and prepared to leave.

"Figure I still owe you something," Callahan said worried. "You worked."

"I got here," Ragan said. "That's what I wanted."

They shook hands and he left, the whisky warming him. He sniffed the air and felt peace rise in him and, with it, the unexpressed resolve that had brought him home. He was going back to Cottonwood, up in the heart of the Triangle, and now he gave thought to getting on.

There might be a Cottonwood horse at one of the local feed corrals. It was the habit of the country's stableman to exchange mounts back and forth according to travelers' needs. If someone hadn't come in from Cottonwood and left a horse for somebody else to return, then Ragan could ride a Canyon City animal over there and leave it for another man's use coming back. Ragan had the money for that and enough over to keep him a few days while he looked for a job. A man had to eat, as he had said, no matter what else drove him and, to eat, Chance Ragan needed a cowhorse, a rope and a chore.

He was moving north toward the flat when a woman's friendly voice called, "Hello, Chance! You got here."

Ragan hauled around. A second later he had pulled his shoulders high. Joy Kildane sat in a roundback chair on the shadowy, inset porch of the Canyon Hotel. Men sat in chairs on either side of her and, because of them, Ragan for the moment forgot Joy Kildane. Neither Terrebine nor Younts had changed in the year that had passed, except for something that now showed in their eyes. That was wariness, Ragan thought, and hostility behind a guise of welcoming pleasure.

Ragan wasn't expecting this, wasn't prepared for it. Arch Terrebine came to his feet, grinning abruptly, a dark, long-legged man whose powerful shoulders were covered by a red shirt. He was handsome, he was smooth, but the pleasure he showed at Ragan's appearance here wasn't real.

"Howdy, Chance," he drawled. "Joy said she seen you in Dalles City. You look fine, fellow. Welcome home."

Ragan swung up the one step to the porch. He took Terrebine's offered hand, felt its powerful grip, and let go promptly. He shuttled his gaze to Younts, who had tipped a nod but kept seated. Younts was a stocky man of no particular complexion save for the deep weathering of his skin, for he was completely hairless, without even beard or eye hair. The shininess of his temples and crown suggested a halo, and because this fit Younts to ironic perfection he had been nicknamed "Angel."

Embarrassment was all through Ragan, for Callahan's freight outfit had given him the look of a tramp. Inanely he said,

"You're off your home range, Joy. What you doing way down here?"

"Judd had business," Joy said. "He's at the courthouse."

"And," Terrebine added, "I've been buying her a ring."

RAGAN'S eyes were still on Joy, watching the flush creep into her cheeks. Terebine hadn't gone through the ceremony of fitting the ring to her finger yet, for her gloveless brown hands were bare. Ragan smiled at her, a ghostly smile that was memory of nights under the stars with her, and between them an unspoken want. But not want of him—not of this Ragan whom neither of them wanted now. That made the difference, and the difference was absolute.

"Why, congratulations," Ragan murmured to Terrebine. "You've been lucky. Mighty lucky. So far."

"So far," Terrebine agreed, and he watched Ragan.

Angel Younts' lashless eyes stared unblinkingly at Ragan, too.

Ragan touched a finger to his hat, said, "So long," to Joy and left the porch.

Through the rest of that day Ragan rode on for Cottonwood, striking north along the Pendleton Trail. Of glacial origin, this was a region of fractured contours and startling skylines. The John Day River, swirling and burdened with silt, bored westward through incredible gorges, retaining something of the rage and violence of the Ice Age.

Between its three forks lay the Triangle, the pure cow country in a region heavily given to placer mining. This part was of high flats and meadows, blanketed by wild hay and sage, girt all about by the battlements of the high brakes. Pine stood on the elevations, pungently fragrant, and the blue sky held autumn brightness without the punishment of full heat.

As he came down from the bluff of Porcupine Creek and crossed the wooden bridge, Ragan for the first time felt the sense of having fully returned. Cottonwood lay before him, a raw and violent town in whose vicinity he had spent seven of his twenty-eight years. The old trees of the creek flat shaded its plain houses and false-fronted business street. Roads and trails ran out from Cottonwood to the hill ranches along the upper north branch and the habitable reaches of the middle fork.

Miners came through on the Willow Creek trail, bound for Dixie or Eldorado or some other diggings that had drawn their needle. They paused to reoutfit and drink Cottonwood's whisky and taste its fun. But mainly it was the Blue Mountain buckaroos who gave Cottonwood its life and being.

Ragan pulled down on the main street, hunting change with an old-timer's keen interest and seeing none. The constancy of this town had always pleased him. He had changed, but Cottonwood had not, its cattle range had not. Therefore he could find his old self here. He knew he could. He was all but positive of that.

When he had left his gear on the porch of the Roundup Hotel, Ragan turned his hired horse over to the stableman. He was of two minds as he walked back along the plank walk, wondering whether to ride the grubline until he had latched on with some hill outfit or whether to wait and catch the different ranchers as they came into town. But he returned to the Roundup and registered, the decision put off for a day or two.

He climbed to the room assigned him, cleaned up and found, all at once, that he was completely exhausted. The saddle had felt good to him all through the long ride, but, like whisky, its toll came later. Depression settled on him then, for he knew it would be a long while before he could turn out the work a rancher had a right to expect when he paid wages for a tophand.

Ragan lack back on the bed, and thoughts began to crowd him because he had laid this way and thought one ceaseless thought for too long. But there was something new in it. Pace Hanna had told him of Terrebine's expansion, Terrebine had told him of Joy Kildane's new ring. The will ran out of Ragan, leaving him exhausted, and he slept. . . .

*"You don't know men as well as I figured," Ragan murmured*

TWO DAYS in Cottonwood, and Ragan was wondering if he had made a mistake in coming back. He had spent a pleasant day renewing acquaintances within the town. Andy Julian had been in and Dana Walgamott, but neither needed riders nor gave any indication that they ever would. The next day being Saturday, the whole hill country came to town. It welcomed Chance Ragan, as had Cottonwood, and as carefully the country stood its distance. There wasn't any job for Chance Ragan, not even a made one, not even a wrangler's, a hooligan's or a cook's job to be had.

There was a dance in the lodge hall that night. Though it might have meant the chance to see a few men he had missed, Ragan stayed away. It wasn't all because of the many men who had seen him and heard him and turned him down. Joy Kildane would be at the dance and probably Nancy Hanna and other girls Ragan had known. And he kept out of the saloons. Instead, he took a quart of whisky to his room. He sat beside a smoking lamp, drinking and rolling cigarettes, until the bottle was half gone. It didn't make him drunk, not actually. His mind stayed cold, uplifted, a tunnel through which ran that endless thought.

He was face to face with a fact, a painful fact, one a man would keep buried if he could. The life in a country like this was a fluid. Let a man be lifted out for a time and his place was filled and it was as if he had never occupied it. He could come back, but not to the old place. That was gone, both in the region and in the minds of the people, in the thoughts of the women. Unless he came back triumphantly, impressively—and that Chance Ragan had

not done. The brooding stopped summarily when somebody's knuckles hit Ragan's door.

Ragan called a command and watched the door swing inward. Angel Younts stood framed there, paused with a hand clutching the door knob. His hat was set precisely on his hairless head. Younts grinned then, and came on in, closing the door.

"Howdy, Chance," he said. "Why ain't you at the dance?"

"Why aren't you?"

"Same reason you ain't. Who'd dance with me?"

Ragan put down his glass. He nearly rose from his chair, then settled back. Younts came on across the room and dropped his weight onto the edge of the bed. He was big without height, a blocky man who somehow managed to move with the ease of a cat. He wore a gun, which few men did in town. He had a ranch in the high brakes of the middle fork, where the wild horses ran and, with them, the human wildlings of the country. Younts was much suspect but a free man because he had more cunning than those who would bring him afoul the law.

"We're two of a kind," Younts resumed. "Cutbacks. Culls."

"Damn you, Younts!"

"Now, take it easy," Younts said, lifting a hand. "You ain't found a job, have you? Maybe you've guessed what they're saying. You look like hell. A man can tell it's gone out of you. Who'd want to pay for your work?"

"Why'd you come here, man?" Ragan demanded.

"Terrebine sent me," Younts said easily. "He's got a job for you. He figures he owes you something."

"Doing what?"

"Part of my crew. Buying. Driving to the mining camps. Your old work mainly, except I'm the boss."

Ragan came to a stand. For a long moment he watched Younts. It caused the man no discomfort. Younts pulled out tobacco, selected a paper and applied himself to spinning a cigarette. He let the temper spew up in Ragan and run out. Younts knew men. He could jab them painfully or tickle them pleasantly and use them if they were sufficiently tractable.

"Younts," Ragan said, "Terrebine got me out of the company once Why would he take me back?"

YOUNTS made wrinkles where his eyebrows should have been. "He ain't offered to take you back into the company, Chance. He's offered a job. A puncher's job. You want it?"

"Ah," Ragan said all at once. "She tried to get her brother to give me a job, too. But Terrebine can't be as independent as Judd. Younts, tell Terrebine where I said he could put his job. And you with it. And the Terrebine Meat Company and its monopoly. And—"

"Joy Kildane?" Younts asked softly, when Ragan broke off.

"Get out of here, Younts!" Ragan said.

Angel Younts laughed, dropped his cigarette on the carpet and walked out.

That did it for Ragan. He finished the bottle. When it was gone he could scarcely walk but still was not drunk. He could hear the music from the dance downstreet, his mind pictured the couples, and his memory told him that he had been called a cutback, a cull, by scum like Angel Younts. The man had wanted to hurt, of course. He had exaggerated.

But there was some basis for what Younts had said, and hadn't it been proved by Joy Kildane?

## CHAPTER IV

### *Riding Job*

RAGAN still had a few dollars in his pocket. He stayed on in Cottonwood until room rent and whisky had used it up. He didn't want that. He hated the inertia that had come upon him. But something had let go deep in his brain, that something which had shaped him and made him a man. Ragan didn't

know what it was. His spirit, perhaps, his very soul. But it had been torn in two. Ragan couldn't patch it, and each day he cared less that he couldn't.

He wasn't concerned the morning he found himself dead broke, save that he retained the pride to move out of the hotel while he could still square up.

He slept in the town corral that night, cursing the hostler who tried half-heartedly to run him off. He awakened with bright sun in his eyes, not hungry but clawed to pieces by thirst. There wasn't money now for whisky, and Ragan's mind went oddly to the moonshiners who made Blue Ruin back in the mountains. Four-bit likker. Rotgut. The kind of booze a tramp had to drink if he was too proud to cadge in the bars. Ragan laughed.

He climbed to his feet, a tall, gaunt figure with straw clinging to his filthy clothes. His eyes were red-stained, truculent, his sunken cheeks heavy with black beard. He knew how he looked, and he felt even worse than that.

The hostler came out of the feed stable and said, "If you'll spend it on breakfast, I'll give you a chance to earn a dollar."

"How?" Ragan asked.

The man pointed to a fork. Ragan nodded and went to work, cleaning the corral. He did it thoroughly, though his splitting head was almost unbearable. The hostler didn't trouble to stop him until he had really earned the money. Then he tossed Ragan a dollar, with a skeptical look, as if he doubted that Ragan would spend it for food.

Ragan went down to the creek and washed, the dollar in his pocket and momentarily forgotten. He filled his belly with the creek's cold water, but it only nauseated him. Afterward he stretched out under a cottonwood and tried to sleep again. It wouldn't come. He was keyed-up now, raw-edged and, worse, he was thinking again. But he had learned something. Drinking wouldn't kill a man's thoughts, if they came from deep enough in his mind. Ragan wondered what would stop them, and he didn't find any answer.

"Ragan fell off the merry-go-round," he mused. "It whirled him right off."

He wakened to the realization that someone had touched his shoulder and shaken him. He was on his belly, his head on his arms. He breathed a curse, a protest, and tried to go to sleep again. Then a voice spoke, and it was a girl's voice speaking his name.

"Chance—"

If it had been Joy Kildane's voice, Ragan wouldn't have set up so quickly. But it wasn't Joy. It was another girl.

"Nancy!" Ragan breathed.

"Hello, Chance," Nancy Hanna answered. She had dropped to her knees and she remained that way, regarding him soberly. Her hair was yellow, her cheeks tan, and her eyes the deepest brown in the country. Her shoulders were straight, her waist slender, and the plainness of her green blouse showed Ragan a woman's full roundness. "Man at the corral told me he thought you'd come down here to fish or feed the fishes," Nancy added.

"He was partly right," Ragan said. "Where's Pace?" Suddenly he wanted to see that friendly man, for the sheer purpose of talking with somebody who treated him as in the old days.

"Home," Nancy said. "I came in alone. To get you, Chance. I heard you were on a tear. Now, let down your hackles. That's your business. Dad wants to see you but couldn't come, so he sent me to fetch you."

"To feed me?" Ragan asked sharply.

"Cut it out, Chance. I brought you a horse. Say the word, and I'll lead him back up Wildcat Creek."

RAGAN climbed to his feet, and Nancy leaped up lightly. She wasn't small but he made her seem so with his gaunt height. Her eyes, regarding him, were casual, friendly. She had seen men at their worst and hadn't let it blind her to their best. A man's whiskers, his sweat, his passions and his weaknesses held no offense for Nancy Hanna. She turned and started walking, and Ragan tramped along beside her.

Nancy had left her horse before the Roundup Hotel, a sleek, smallish black. A

heavier roan stood beside it, wearing Pace Hanna's Ladder brand on its left shoulder.

She looked at Ragan hesitantly and said, "You want to bring your warbag?"

Ragan tensed. "Now, look—" he began.

"You can bring it right back if you like," Nancy said calmly. "But it would be a long ride back for it if you take the job Dad and Kitch Dunsan have in mind."

"Kitch Dunsan?" Ragan intoned. "What's that fuzz-cheek got to do with it?"

Nancy flushed. "Kitch is twenty-two, Chance. And running the Spade. Frank Dunsan died last winter. Kitch and us are running out own beef roundup now. The only one in the country. Where's your stuff?"

"Corral," Ragan said. "We'll stop for it."

Within minutes they were riding southeast from Cottonwood, moving at a fast trot along the meanders of Wildcat Creek, its wide bench-banks high above them. Nancy had made no purchases in Cottonwood, had obviously come only to get Ragan. That interested him and made him wary. Pace Hanna couldn't afford hired help, even if he had need of it, and the need was doubtful with Nancy as good as a man in the saddle.

But the Spade was different for, in the old days, Frank Dunsan had always kept a couple of hands, besides his red-headed son Kitch. Ragan han't yet seen anybody from the Spade, and they were holding roundup. Hope rose in him.

Where the creek bent north, the trail climbed out of its gorge. They came into rugged country and were dwarfed by the towering mountains. To their left ran the high brakes of the middle John Day, crowding the cloudless sky. They were staggering rises, climbing in step-back terraces for as high as three thousand feet, the flaming rock of their lava nature a striking bright red in the sun. On all the slopes and the headlands grew the ever-present pine.

Ragan sat loose in the saddle, beginning to throw off his headache and with it the feeling of filth from his drunk and his lack of grooming. Nancy was quiet, and he watched her often and thought of her steadily. He didn't think that this was any mission of salvation with Nancy. She had been sent to get him, and Ragan remembered her flush when he had spoken of the callowness of Kitch Dunsan. Kitch and Nancy had grown up on neighboring ranches, Ragan knew, had run together as the country expressed it.

The trail began to twist and ask more of the horses. They crossed the divide and started to descend into the country Nancy Hanna called home. Presently they were crossing the little interlocked flats of wild meadow that made the high country good cattle range. Four hours thereafter they were riding down on Hanna's Ladder headquarters.

The ranch buildings lay at the foot of the east spur of the Blues and its towering heights. The house was small, a starter log cabin to which additions had been made of dressed lumber. Headquarters stood on the flat of a brawling creek, and out from the site ran Hanna's winter feeding flat of many acres.

Ragan had come here often in the old days, and it was here that Hanna brought the half-frozen Ragan he had found in the snowdrift. The Spade lay south of here, and then beyond the Spade sprawled the big holdings of Judd Kildane's Teeter. The three outfits held most of the foothill range, while westward lay the other spreads of the upper middle fork.

IF PACE HANNA had been too busy with his roundup to come for Ragan, he didn't show it. He was seated on the front porch of the house, obviously waiting for Ragan and Nancy. Pace got up and hitched his pants as he came down the steps, walking in a cowman's twisting, wide-legged stride.

"You look like the wrath of God," Pace said.

Ragan grinned at him. "You sent good bait, Pace. All right. Feed me good, now that I'm here."

"We'll eat," Pace agreed. "Then we'll go over and see Kitch."

"He got a real job?" Ragan asked suspiciously. "Or making one?"

"Both," Pace said cheerfully. "Light down and rest your saddle, Chance. I'll put up the cayuses."

Ragan stepped out of the saddle, more tired than he wanted the Hannas to see. Nancy swung down lightly, smiled an invitation, and led Ragan toward the house. Ragan swung around then, knowing what he was going to do before anything else. His old range clothes were in his roll, together with a razor and what else he needed. He called, "I'll be back," after Nancy and strode off.

He got his gear, left Hanna to finish with the horses and struck out for the creek in the brush-screened distance behind the ranch buildings. There he stripped and bathed, afterward standing naked in the bright sunshine while he shaved. He dressed, combed his hair, and sat for a moment smoking a cigarette.

He wrinkled his nose at his discarded clothing, scooped a hole in the sandbar and buried it. At that moment he heard Pace bawl, "Come and get it!" and went back to the house.

Ragan ate dinner with relish, the first time he had enjoyed food in months. It was the exercise, the mountain air, and more than that. He was relaxing, because with Pace and Nancy Hanna he had no reason to be defensive about his poor physical condition. After dinner Pace and Ragan saddled fresh horses and made the long ride on to Spade.

As Pace Hanna had been, Kitch Dunsan also was expecting Ragan. The Spade was situated much the same as the Ladder save only that Spade had a bunkhouse for riders. Kitch Dunsan was big, red-headed and freckled, and had a quick and friendly grin. But he looked more mature than Ragan remembered him, the consequence of the responsibility inherited with the ranch.

"You couldn't have picked a better time to come back, Chance," Kitch boomed, shaking Ragan's hand. "You and Pace come into the office. I got a bottle, and we've both got a proposition."

"You don't need a rider?" Ragan asked.

"Hell, no. I'm full up at the ranch, Chance. This is special."

"Look—" Ragan began, pulling himself taller.

Kitch grinned at him. "Let down your hackles. If you take this job, you'll never have tackled anything harder. But let's go set and sip while we chew on it."

They were presently seated in battered chairs in what Ragan remembered as Frank Dunsan's office, off the main room of the house. It was a small, plain room, its walls of uncovered boards long since turned brown by time. There was a desk and a safe, an out-of-date calendar furnished some time in the past by a merchant in Dalles City. There was a blindless window with the glass panes nearly impervious to sight.

"You know our Squabble Creek line camp, Chance," Kitch said. "How'd you like to squat on it this winter?"

"Me?" Ragan demanded.

"You and a few cows," Kitch said. "Pace and Dad cooked it up. They were going to put me out there. Now Dad's gone, and I can't do it. So when Pace told me you were coming back, we both knew what we wanted from you."

"You're freaks in this country, if you want something," Ragan muttered.

"Who'd be a better man," Pace asked, "to tackle the Terrebine Meat Company?"

RAGAN sat up straight in his chair. "Come again."

Pace grinned. "You heard me. Terrebine and Younts are pulling off the oddest and juiciest rustling job I ever heard of."

"Rustling?" Ragan gasped.

"That's what you call stealing cows, ain't it?" Pace was enjoying the shock he had thrown into Ragan. He made himself a cigarette, licked the paper and sealed it. Then he looked at Ragan through squinted eyes. "See why you were dealt out of the company, Chance?"

"No," Ragan said.

"You're honest," Pace drawled. "Where your ex-partner is as crooked as a rushed snake. We got onto it last spring early. Younts and his riders were burning too much moonlight. We figured it out, but

the hell of it is that it's blamed near catch-proof."

"I'm no range detective," Ragan growled.

"You jughead," said Pace. "Don't you see it's a sure cinch Terrebine was behind what happened to you? That's your stake in it, feller. Me and Kitch want to stop the rustling. Maybe we want to laugh at our neighbors. On top of that it'd help us both to winter-graze some stuff at the Squabble Creek camp. We're making up the cut now. So the three of us can make a deal."

"Lay it on the line, Pace," Ragan said.

## CHAPTER V

### *Hole in the Sky*

PACE was eased by what he saw in Ragan's face, and was growing more excited.

"Arch Terrebine's buying cattle, too," he told Ragan, "and a lot of it! He's got his own string of butcher shops, I'd say fifteen or twenty, in the mining camps up and down the Blues. That's year-round business, and Younts told me Terrebine turns over three or four thousand head a year."

"He would," Ragan agreed. "We used to do that selling to independent shops."

"The difference," Pace said, "is that the miners pay through the nose for their beef now. That's the way everything else is priced in them camps, though, and they come through. Terrebine pays the ranchers forty dollars a head. If he don't clear another forty through his shops, I'll eat every steer he's got on hand at this minute. And what Younts' crew rustles for him is pure gravy."

"You sound certain he's rustling," Ragan said. "I'm not. Other night in town, Younts offered me a job. If they dealt me out so they could rustle, why'd they want to take me back?"

Pace looked surprised. "Damned if I know. But they're rustling."

"What do you base that on?"

"Suspicions, hunches, and some things we've seen," Pace answered promptly. "We know good and well Younts drifted cattle up past the Squabble Creek camp all last winter, after Kitch had pulled his rider out. Seen sign and, laying for 'em, we seen cattle."

"Been me," Ragan said, "I'd have latched onto 'em, then and there."

"You wouldn't of," Pace contradicted. "That's where they're some smooth. You know how the legitimate part's run. Most ranchers like the kind of markets the mines make. Did myself, back in your time. Man don't have to hold a big beef roundup, then drive to hell and gone to ship. Needs to round in only fifty head at a time and hold 'em on hay and cottonseed cake a spell. Then the buyers take and scatter 'em to their feeding pens in the different camps. Easy-going, year-round work and a steady market."

"What's changed?" Ragan asked.

"That part ain't," Pace admitted. "But it's my notion that every ranch around here that's got a Terebine beef contract is furnishing more steers than he ever tallies or gets paid for. They only have a calf-roundup. One chance a year to tally the herds. But Kitch and me know damned well we've been losing stuff. Yet who's going to prove it? Terrebine buys steers in every brand but mine and Kitch's and he gets bills-of-sale on every wad. Stop 'em with a rustled cut and they can flash a bill-of-sale on any brand they've got along. Kitch's stuff can be worked into a Double Horseshoe. And mine a J B."

Ragan didn't say anything for a moment. Pace's opinion was beyond arguing. That put sense behind what had happened to Chance Ragan, made certain what had only been suspect. He saw why it would be useful for someone to occupy Dunsan's summer line camp through the winter. The flat commanded a pass through the Blues, and the mining camps were mostly beyond the divide.

Younts' high hill ranch lay south of the Squabble Creek, this side of the summit. He could be watched, and occupancy of Squabble Flat would complicate matters for the rustlers. They would have to be

caught rustling; not after they were in possession of stolen steers. The proposition looked cut to Chance Ragan's size. He began to grin, and it wasn't a pleasant expression.

But there were practical objections, and Ragan said, "What do I live on? You men's beef?"

"Line shack's already stocked for the winter," Kitch Dunsan said promptly. "Would have put one of my boys up there if you hadn't come back. There'll be riding pay if you'll look after the stuff me and Pace would really like to winter up there. And fix the place up. Lots of work needed up there. Me and Pace'll split the bill."

Ragan searched the young cattleman's face, moved by his fear of being helped through any man's pity. He saw nothing disturbing in Kitch's open, good-natured expression. Pace Hanna looked guileless. Ragan's grin came again, and he said, "Boys, it's a deal. When do I start?"

"We'll go up today," Kitch said, and Pace shoved back his hat and smiled. . . .

THE first week at the Squabble Creek line camp was like manna from heaven to Ragan. Except for its command of one of the passes to the big boom camps of Cracker, Auburn, Baker City and Sparta, there was nothing to distinguish the large, level-bottomed mountain hole from a thousand others in this ice-dug terrain. The camp's little log dugout was set in under the north bench. Water bubbled out of a spring for the shack and corrals, while the creek irrigated the flat from end to end.

There was a fenced horse pasture west of the structures. On the terrace above the bench, grew pine. There was not only the big open flat for cattle to run on but all kinds of interlinking plateaus, most of that land lying back of the Spade, the Ladder, and the Teeter, and assigned to those ranches by common consent.

The Squabble Creek camp had originally been an independent cattle operation, so was more complete than the usual ranch outcamp. Ragan looked over the good barn with attached shed, the several corrals, the stacker-pole where somebody had once piled hay. Spring-fed cottonwoods screened the house, though by climbing the talus behind the place, Ragan could sweep the whole flat with his sight.

Kitch Dunsan hadn't been exaggerating when he had spoken of the repairs needed. A summer camp and a winter camp were two different matters. Ragan knew he would have to patch the roofs and walls of all the buildings before snow flew and the cold winds came. The fences needed repairing. The shack could use more shelves, a better bed, some extra furniture. There was stove wood to lay up. Moreover, the outfits that had hired Ragan jointly would send up a bunch of steers as soon as they had completed roundup and sorted out the animals in shape to winter out. Disregarding Terrebine and Younts, Ragan knew he would be kept busy and not by made work scratched up for him out of pity and charity.

Ragan had kept the roan he had ridden out from Cottonwood, and Dunsan was going to send up a string of horses with the cattle. Though Ragan had been through here, back in the days when he was buying cattle with Arch Terrebine, he wanted to make himself more familiar with the country. So he spent a lot of time in the saddle, getting his body hardened to it again. He saw nothing of Angel Younts who now was his closest neighbor, nor any of Younts' men. The summered Spade cattle had planted so many tracks in the vicinity there was nothing to do but wait for new operations to begin, if Younts was really using this section as a part of them.

Ragan still did not doubt that Pace Hanna had called it to a turn. There was now no doubt in Ragan's mind that Terrebine would scruple at nothing to gain a dollar. The rustling scheme, as Pace had picked it apart, was the slick kind of thing Terrebine would like. But, however safe the operation, once the stolen cattle were in the meat company's hands, picking it up off its home range was as dangerous as any other long-looping activity. There was the weakness, the entering wedge for Ragan.

He believed, with his two friends, that the activity up here the winter before had

been part of the illegal gathering and holding. Terrebine had a slough of bills-of-sale to cover any brand found in his regular corrals or in his road cuts. But there would be a point between home range and Terrebine's legitimate premises where even those wouldn't save the man from embarrassment and, quite likely, from real trouble.

The rustling was important in itself to many a good, hardworking cowman. But to Ragan it was more than that—a personal matter, revolving about his own tortured months of existence, about the man who was putting a ring on the finger of Joy Kildane. Ragan knew that the Kildanes' Teeter had a beef contract with Terrebine. Quite likely the man was stealing from the very ranch he expected to connect himself with by marriage.

WHEN RAGAN knew every landmark, every pitfall for cattle, every game trail for his own use, every characteristic of the vicinity, he took an ax and rode up to the timber to fell poles, the rough material for firewood and fence and building repair. Beyond that, it was the kind of hard, muscle-building work he craved. For several days he worked from dawn to dusk. It made him eat, and it made him sleep. When he shaved, at irregular intervals, his mirror hinted that he stood a chance of beating the thing within him that had broken his health beyond seeming hope of repair. But maybe not the thing eating at his heart.

The disruption came as a total surprise. Riding down for his noon dinner, Ragan dropped off the high terrace to see a saddled horse standing in his yard. He didn't recognize the horse but supposed it was somebody from the Spade or the Ladder until he drew near enough to read the Teeter brand. That caused Ragan surprise, and he rode down into the yard looking thoughtful.

Then a figure appeared in the doorway, and Joy Kildane said, "Hello, Chance. I was wondering if you never got hungry."

For a moment Ragan could only stand there with his heart thumping hard. He was hungry now, hungry for the slim, smiling girl he gazed upon. He swung from the saddle and dropped the reins of his horse. Joy came down the single step that lifted to the dugout door, offering her hand. Ragan took it but his gaze fell to the other hand, her left, against the front of a supple thigh. There was no ring there. Arch Terrebine hadn't, even yet, completed that ceremony.

She knew what he searched for and her expression changed. The smile was erased, and uncertainty tugged at her mouth, then the smile came again. "That's right, Chance," she murmured. "Not yet."

"Then welcome," Ragan said. "And let's have that dinner."

"I'd like some," Joy said, relieved.

Ragan did the cooking, unabashed, and unapologetic for the crude facilities he had to offer. They talked slightly, referring to nothing that was important to them, Ragan never daring to pick up one of the questions crowding his mind. He wondered how she had known where to find him, why she had wanted to, why Terrebine hadn't yet completed his conquest. The first question was not unimportant, for Pace and Kitch had meant to keep the proposed winter use of the line camp quiet as long as possible.

Needing an answer to that, Ragan said, "How'd you track me down?"

"Grapevine rumor," Joy said promptly, framed in the light of the dugout's one window and watching him cook. "Judd heard in town you left Cottonwood with Nancy Hanna. I saw Eudora Parker at Long Creek. She goes with a Spade puncher. He'd told her they were making up a little bunch to winter up here. So it looked to me like I had you spotted." Joy's eyes twinkled in amusement over her feminine deviousness.

It surprised Ragan that both Kildanes had kept a line on him. He remembered Judd's evasive dismissal of him aboard the *Inland Queen*. He remembered Joy in Canyon City with Arch Terrebine for the purpose of buying her a ring. And he remembered beyond that, much further back. He hadn't really gone with Joy in

the manner of the country. His cattle buying had kept him too much on the hump for that. But they had been together now and then, and he had believed that she sought it as much as he did.

Ragan didn't know why a man could sometimes sense when a woman was drawn to him by her body if not with her mind. In a conflict, an inner struggle, in which the body was apt to win.

HE HAD FELT that in Joy Kildane and once had tested it and found himself to be right. After a dance, on a starlit mesa, she had poured back his kisses. She had strained back his hunger and left it to Ragan to break it up. Withal, something in her head had stood between them, as if two forces in Joy Kildane drove her on diverging lines.

Now Ragan said, "Yeah, I'm going to winter up here, Joy. And it's not a far ride to the Teeter. Am I welcome?"

"I don't know, Chance," Joy said. "You were gone so long. You didn't try to keep in touch. People said you'd never be back."

"Or if I came back," Ragan said bluntly, "that I wouldn't be worth a damn."

The girl straightened. "All right, there was that kind of talk, too. But I never thought about it much, except to hope you came through all right. Chance, don't come to the Teeter unless I see you again. Now, let's eat before you let everything burn up."

That was as far as it went. They ate, talking over Triangle news and news from the outside world that had drifted in. Then Joy Kildane mounted her horse and rode out.

Ragan didn't go back to the timber that day. He was left depressed, inflamed anew by Joy, put again on edge by her resumed indecision. He could have paddled her and at the same time he wished that she was still here.

Regan set to work against winter, knowing the ferocity of the storms that could come to the high Blues with little warning. He cut wood and chinked walls and patched roofs, making the buildings tight for himelf and the animals that would be in his charge any day now. He repaired the horse pasture fence, cleaned out the springs and dug their earth overflow tank bigger. Meanwhile he watched the flat and its myriad interconnecting trails and saw nothing of Younts or any of the man's crew.

## CHAPTER VI

### *Rifle Shot!*

MORE privately satisfactory to Ragan than anything else was the weight he began to put on his lank and bony frame. It didn't come all at once, the weight or stamina or sense of well-being that meant a body in good order. But the hands that had been stiffened by frost-bite were good, callused hands again. The foot and leg that had been stiffened and withered, that the Portland doctors would have cut off, these parts responded more slowly. They were hurt, blighted.

The prospect, the dread of being permanently handicapped was no new thing with Ragan. Yet it was a thing he never got used to, could never accept.

With a woodpile that satisfied him, Ragan banked more dirt against the walls of the dugout, knowing how much it would increase the interior's warmth. He fixed himself a couple more shelves and braced the shack's two wobbly chairs. He relaced the bunk and cut new grass for padding. He grew impatient for the arrival of the cattle. And he thought interminably about Arch Terrebine and Angel Younts.

He kept track of time and at the end of two weeks knew he would soon be receiving his cattle. He was ready for them and the responsibility and hard work six months of wintering out would foist upon him. Having nothing urgent left to do, he decided one afternoon to ride to the Spade the next day to see how it was coming along, perhaps to wait and bring the cut up himself.

He rode in early that day for his supper.

He turned his horse into the corral, not wanting the bother of stalking it in the big horse pasture the next morning, and started for the house. He was a dozen steps from the building when something howled past his ear and, up on the bench behind the place, a rifle cracked viciously. Ragan was unarmed, wholly unprepared for such a thing. Stunned, he bolted for the dugout. His awkward foot tangled and he went sprawling.

Once more he heard the spiteful crack of the rifle, from up above somewhere. The bullet gouged into the packed earth close to Ragan. He scrambled up and ran for the door of the dugout. His shell-belt hung on a peg on the inside wall, next to the door. Ragan took it down, his punished nerves cringing, but his mind wholly stable. He wasn't frightened or incensed. By the time he had buckled on the gun-belt his fingers had stopped shaking.

Due to the angle at which the shack sat against the bluff, he could step back through the doorway without danger. Doing so, Ragan paused, pressed against the front wall. He could near nothing. By cutting right, he could screen himself in creek brush.

Ragan acted on the thought instantly, running quietly on past the springs. There, for a great while, he stood like a man of stone, his eyes searching through the brush screen for some tattling sign on the low rim ahead of him. He saw no movement, no shape. But he felt certain that the rifleman was still up there waiting, his mission not being to scare Chance Ragan off the Squabble Creek flat but to kill him.

This awareness had keened Ragan's mind, his senses, to razor sharpness. He wanted that man, not merely to kill one who would have killed him, but to identify him. If he waited long enough the killer would move, and Ragan had patience, worlds and worlds of practiced patience.

The intensity was fading out of the light. Nothing showed on the sharp line of the bluff tip. Then, at long last, Ragan's patience proved itself to be greater than that of the other man. The fellow moved, the other way from Ragan, hoping to get on a better angle to the dugout. Ragan saw the barrel of a rifle for a second, well down from him. Ragan went on, moving away from the man because he knew how to get up on the rim from a distance to the south.

At the end of the springs copse, Ragan bellied across the rock of the talus. The movement brought no gunfire. Presently Ragan dared to rise to a sharply bent crouch so he could climb. He moved upward through the rocks, and at last lifted himself stealthily onto the benchtop. The irregularity of the top cut him from sight from the killer.

Ragan pulled off his boots. Then he circled until he was directly behind the man, and started in toward the lip again.

SOUNDLESSLY he came up over a swell that gave him a dead shot at his adversary. He yelled, "Boo!" grimly and angrily amused at what it would do to the intent man's nerves. The man clawed around, swinging the rifle. He spotted Ragan and found himself looking squarely into the muzzle of a .45. Fear and panic and rage showed in his sweating face.

"Easy," Ragan advised. "It's a long fall if I blow you over the ridge."

Ragan knew for sure now. He had seen this man before, knew his name. Squint Lister. He rode for Angel Younts and obviously had come here with his Winchester .30-.30 at Younts' orders. But Lister let go of the rifle now. He stood there on his knees, his bearded mouth sagged open.

"Hell of a way to call on a new neighbor," Ragan murmured. "How come you tried to down me, Squint? How come you knew I was here? I haven't seen any of you tough Younts boys around here, so far."

Lister waited in open fright, expecting to receive the treatment he would have administered had he been in Ragan's boots. "Feller, you're tougher than they claim you are," he muttered.

"Than who claims?" Ragan asked softly. "Younts?"

"Looks like this is between you and

me. Why bring him into it?"

"He sent you. Where's your horse? I'm delivering you back to him personally. It's your say whether it's alive or dead."

Lister ruminated, then pointed. "Horse is down in the bottom, other end of the bench."

"We'll get him," Ragan said.

He drove Squint Lister ahead of him, back to where Ragan had left his boots. Ragan made the disarmed man stand at a distance while he tugged on the boots. Then they went on, dropping down to the bottom where Lister's mount was concealed in the brush. Ragan led the horse as they circled on the lower level, returning to the shack. There he made Lister saddle the roan. Presently they were mounted and striking south for Angel Younts' back hills layout.

Dusk was thick about them as they drew in sight of the place. It was called the Fork, and as they rode down into it, Ragan saw that considerable alterations had been made to fit the place into Terrebine's beef-handling system. The big feeding flat was divided now into many corrals. Here came the beef bought in the Triangle, and here it was sorted, held as necessary on cottonseed cake, then started on for Terrebine's scattered slaughterhouses and retail outlets.

The buildings were as old and as ramshackle as in the old days. There was a light in the house, where the crew lived. Unarmed and helpless, Squint Lister rode in a subdued mood beside Ragan, humiliated by this outcome of his errand, yet showing a little relief at being back on the Fork.

As they came into the ranchyard, Ragan saw a man come to the open door and look out, the waxy yellow lamplight bright on his outlined shape.

"Send Younts out!" Ragan called.

The man straightened and ducked back. Beyond the grimy windows figures stirred in sudden excitement. Then Angel Younts

## Old Steamboat

**Have you ever heard the story,**
**When Old Steamboat was in his glory,**
**Of the puncher who would ride him on a dare?**
**Just as soon as he hit leather,**
**He went sailing like a feather**
**And they couldn't find that puncher anywhere.**
**Come six weeks or maybe seven,**
**Came a call, "This here is heaven,**
**I'm the gent that rid Old Steamboat, friend; you see,**
**When he pitched me I kept goin',**
**Where I was there was no knowin',**
**Only I had lost the pull of gravity.**
**Then an angel must have spied me,**
**For he roped me and hawg-tied me,**
**Turned me loose in pastures green beyond the skies;**
**I'll be headin' homeward pronto,**
**Best regards to Old Steamboat and all the guys."**

By Lucien M. Lewis

appeared in the doorway, hatless, the lamplight glistening on his egglike head.

"I'll be damned," Ragan," Younts drawled as he stepped down into the yard. "This is a surprise."

"Here's your man," Ragan said. "Next one you send will come back strapped across his horse. I promise you that, Angel. Don't forget it for a minute."

"How come you taken up Squabble Flat?" Younts asked, not troubling to deny connection with Lister's gun-try.

"How come you offered me a job, Angel?" Ragan retorted.

"At that time you didn't have one," Younts murmured. "Looks like you got one, now. You're doing better than I figured you could, Ragan. Keep on, and you'll shake loose from us cutbacks, maybe."

"Younts," Ragan said in a low voice, "Before too long I'm going to break your back with my bare hands."

"That so?" Younts asked. "You must have what they call faith, Ragan. You sure must have."

"I'm warning you. Don't send anybody after me again. Because the next time I have to come down here, it'll be to settle it."

Ragan swung his horse and rode off.

WHEN he was again at the dugout on Squabble Creek, he prepared a delayed supper. As he ate, he changed his mind about going down to the Spade on the morrow. A hunch had come to him at the Fork, seeing the land and the way it lay, together with Terrebine's holding pens.

The next morning Ragan ate a quick breakfast, saddled the roan and rode out, striking east across the flat. The divide that would let a man or cattle across the Blues, at the east end, had thrown his thinking off the track until now. The pass itself probably meant nothing in the illegal part of Younts' operations. What interested Ragan now was the tangled country lying directly back of the Fork, this side of the mountains and south of the divide.

It was clear now that Younts was doing his cattle stealing in the winter time, in the long interval between the fall and spring counting of the herds, which counting with most of the ranches was being done only once—at the calf roundup and branding in the spring. Ragan was wondering if the country back of Younts' layout might not disclose a place where stolen cattle could be held to be fed down into the lots at the Fork headquarters as need and safety permitted. If so, Squabble Flat would have to be crossed laterally instead of lengthwise and, denied the ability to do that, the rustling would be completely obstructed.

Ragan meant to spend some time testing his theory. If he stood squarely in the way of that venture, he was going to have a hot time staying here.

The air, holding in it an ever-strengthening hint of the winter to come, was crisp enough to chill him as he rode. Crossing the flatland, Ragan began to move studiously along the south edge, where uptilts broke above him. He knew that what he sought would not be big and blatant but some unobtrusive opening into the primitive area to the south.

He passed one place before it began to nag at his interest enough to turn him around and bring him back. There was nothing, though, but another crease in the wrinkled hills, like a hundred others ahead and behind. Rains and freezes had long since obliterated any significant tracks of cattle, but old droppings lay in the little gully to an extent worth investigating. Ragan swung his horse into the draw and began to pick his way forward at a fast walk.

For a long while Ragan followed the twisting wrinkle through the hills, without much interest until he came to a dry wash he had not observed on any of his previous explorations. He stood his horse to study the bed of the wash, recognizing it for one of the many small channels in the hills that ran water in winter while drying up each summer. In a flash he saw what use could be made of it, and all at once was convinced that he was following a significant trail.

The low, loose banks of the watercourse showed that its winter-born water never achieved much depth. Winter-rustled cattle could be driven along its course for any distance desired without leaving a trail. Still reined in, Ragan folded his arms on the saddle-horn and considered how he would use this stream with Squabble Flat vacated for the entire winter season. Cattle rustled in stormy weather could be drifted onto the flat without much fear of detection, rain or snow wiping out the tracks. Then or later the cuts could be shoved on through this channel to permanent concealment in the wastes.

Ragan grinned in rising excitement, and rode on.

## CHAPTER VII

### *Rustlers' Cache*

SLOWLY climbing with the watercourse, Ragan went on, the notch of the gully broadening while the hills grew taller. As he pierced deeper into the wasteland he began to question his theory, then all at once he topped out another of the country's interminable high flats.

It was narrow and not long, and a brushy but dry brook ran down its center. The watershed of this piece, Ragan knew, caused the dry bed he had been following. Again he found cattle droppings and was stirred and absorbed once more. But this particular stretch was too small to accommodate many steers. Ragan rode on toward the brush-closed end of the flat, for the mountains notched again up there.

He began to notice a strange thing about the long bunch-clump ahead. It seemed to be completely dead. The brook bed, narrowing and flattening out, showed a boulder field just short of the copse. Ragan lifted his horse to a running trot, swung wide of the boulders, then back in. The brush *was* dead, a thin windrow of it, and there was ample reason. It had no roots. It was a brush fence, woven for a double purpose—concealment and obstruction—at this point above the head of the little brook. It was too high for Ragan to see past it.

He was wary now, though the chances were against anyone's being here at this season. It had taken care and work to prepare this fence which was over three hundred feet in length. Ragan found a gate at the west end, a section that could be lifted out. It was too heavy for him to lift alone, though so, stepping down from saddle he made his way around the end of the fence and went out on afoot. The gully ran on, as it had behind him. But his sense of expectancy was high now and, he soon found, was justified. A hundred yards farther on he came out upon a much bigger flat, one large enough to do the job he knew now had been assigned to it.

Familiar as he was with the country in general, Ragan was not sure where he was, at the moment. He would have liked to ride this reach, also, and see what else opened onto it. But he knew he was crowding his luck by coming here at all, and there was something else that he wanted to investigate. Returning to his horse, he rode back the way he had come.

When he reached the point where he had first come upon the wash, riding in directly from Squabble Flat, Ragan remained in the wash and kept on, following it downward. He had a strong suspicion that the winter watercourse was used for both ingress and egress and wanted to see where this dry bed came out in the lower country.

He had his answer within the hour. For all at once he found himself dropping down onto Wildcat Creek where it came down from Angel Younts' Fork range.

"You've got it, Ragan," he told himself. "Except that there isn't a steer up there right now."

But it sobered him, for now he knew beyond question that he had placed himself squarely athwart the ambitions of Arch Terrebine and Angel Younts. They were using bad weather to cover their rustling, and they dared not risk taking the stuff directly to Younts' breeding pens.

It couldn't be moved in to the secret hole by the same way it was brought out again, for that would put the stuff too close to Yount's spread while it was still hot. Therefore Squabble Flat was indispensable to them, and would see more fighting before long.

Looking about, Ragan wondered how best to get home without running into danger. If he stuck with Wildcat Creek he would come down onto the Spade. This made him remember his previous intention of visiting Kitch Dunsan's spread, maybe to return with the cattle to be wintered out on the flat. He was considering that again when all at once he heard horses in the distance, coming from the direction of Younts' Fork.

Ragan moved without thinking, not wanting to be seen. The quickest way back to Squabble Creek was the way he had come, along the crucial dry wash. He whipped his horse into it, laying tracks but dismissing that because he had already marked the wash from end to end. He knew at once that the riders had heard him and had quickly lifted their horses into pursuit. But it was country that offered no hiding place, and Ragan trusted to the roan's ability to stay ahead. He bent forward, whipping the horse along at top speed.

WHEN he pulled down to listen a little later he could hear nothing behind him. But then he thundered on, considering how to get home without leading his pursuers there directly behind him. Five minutes later he reined in to let his ears keen for sound again. There still was none of the kind for which he listened. Apparently they had given it up.

Ragan spared his tiring horse after that, riding steadily but at a more moderate speed. Then, the third time he halted to listen, he heard a faint sound of pursuit, far in the rear distance.

Still Ragan conserved his horse, though he rode a little faster. Then he rounded a turn in the wash—to confront a horse squarely blocking his way! The rider held a carbine and it was pointed at Ragan.

"Getting yourself an eyeful, huh, Ragan?" aske Squint Lister.

"Where'd you come from?" Ragan grunted.

Lister laughed, an ugly, warning laugh. In his eyes was a deep hostility, stemming from his humiliation of the day before. He said, "You ain't learned all the byways yet, Ragan. Stub stuck to the wash to keep you occupied, while I cut straight for the flat and come back to meet you. Should of had more schoolin', Ragan, before you turned range detective. It's going to cost you what you wiggled out of yesterday."

There was acerbity in the voice, a relished taunt. Ragan stiffened in the saddle, not lifting his hands. In the quiet he could hear the rearward rider who had deceived him. It simply had not occurred to Ragan that someone, knowing the short cuts, might head him off and trap him.

"So you figured it all out!" Squint exulted. "So you wasn't smart enough to take warning from yesterday. Now, feller, you hold your arms up while I ride in and take that hogleg you're packing."

Fear started in Ragan then. Men like Squint, like Younts, knew many ways of killing a man who was wholly at their mercy so as not to arouse too much suspicion. The threat in Squint's eyes was bald and chilling.

Stalling for time, searching his mind for some way out of it, Ragan said, "Younts let me leave the Fork last night. You sure he'd like your beefing me, Squint?"

"Last night," Squint said, "you sort of took the wind out of Angel. He give me billy hell, afterwards, for not dropping you from the rim. And said not to miss another chance or he'd peel my hide. This'll square me with Angel, Ragan. Obliged to you."

"Think nothing of it," Ragan drawled.

Squint sidled his horse over while Ragan weighed his chances. He knew Squint would shoot if he made a false move, but Squint's carbine was more awkward at close range than a handgun would be. Ragan knew he was going to risk it. Squint rode in cautiously. He was kneeing his horse, which hesitated about com-

ing in so close, so that he could keep both hands on the carbine. He would have his hands full in that instant when he reached out to take Ragan's pistol from its holster. Ragan slowly began to lower his right hand toward the brim of his hat.

Then, as Squint's wary features moved closer to him, Ragan jerked off his hat and with it swiped the man hard across the face. Ragan's other hand hit the carbine barrel and deflected it as it cracked viciously. Then he was on Squint as the two horses wheeled away, and they fell together to the earth. Ragan was on top, still holding onto the carbine with his left hand. With his other hand he tried to free his .45 but couldn't get it loose from under his body.

Cursing wildly, Squint tried to wrestle Ragan off. They writhed and rolled through the hot sand of the wash. Ragan couldn't think now of the rider coming on from below. This was life or death, with that other man a separate crisis if this were survived.

SQUINT had an arm around Ragan's neck, was trying to shut off Ragan's wind. Squint Lister stood a chance of losing a second time, and the prospect had turned him berserk. But he had only to hold Ragan until the man he had called Stub came up.

Ragan discerned that intention and his urgency gave him a kind of cool detachment of mind. He rolled slightly to take his weight off his .45. But he lay squarely on it, and Squint's body kept him from turning enough to free the gun. With his head Ragan butted at Squint's sweating, twisted face. Squint simply held on now, waiting for help. He guessed Ragan's intention and rolled himself harder to his right, further burying Ragan's .45.

Ragan caught the still distant racket made by the oncoming horse and felt panic. The hospital months hadn't been good training for a thing like this.

To free his gun he had to roll over on top of Squint. The man knew it and was bending his full strength to prevent that. Ragan quit butting and all at once sank his teeth into the base of Squint's neck. The man yelled and loosened the arm he had around Ragan's head. In the second he was released Ragan heaved himself on top of Squint and tried again to reach his gun. He got the grips but his weight was still on the barrel. He rolled on over and, as he did, lost his hold on Squint's carbine.

Ragan rolled clear free then, scrambling up. He turned twice and leaped onto his knees. Squint, still flat, had flapped over with the carbine, was jacking the lever as he got to his knees. Ragan's hand streaked for his .45. Squint held the carbine stock against his side, was using his body to aim, his mouth open and gasping and his slitted eyes wild.

Ragan brought up his gun, having no choice. He shot. He threw himself aside as he heard the carbine's spiteful crack. But Squint had gone over backward, the carbine lifting with him then, released, thrown over Squint's head.

Ragan's mind was racing as he rose. The approaching horse apparently had been halted when the rider heard the shooting. That was a break, for if Stub came on he would do so warily. Ragan paused only long enough to take a look at Squint. He had shot the man through the chest, and Squint was dead already. Ragan got his hat, then started on up the wash at a lurching run. Around the first turn he saw his horse in the distance. The roan had bolted, then had halted. Ragan stumbled toward the mount in long, uneven strides.

Behind him a distant voice bawled, "Squint! Hey, Squint!"

Ragan reached his horse and mounted, bent only on getting away. Stub would come in cautiously to where the fight had occurred. What he would find would hold him there a while, and Ragan doubted that Stub would come on after him single-handed. Ragan swung the roan around and roweled him on along the wash. After five minutes he halted, but could hear nothing behind him. Then riding on he came to the turn-off defile that would take him out to Squabble Flat, and he began to ease up.

He spilled out onto the flat a while

later, only to pull down his horse in surprise. Cattle dotted the expanse ahead of him. The winter herd had come in while he had been gone. At any other time this would have pleased Ragan, for he had wanted cattle to care for, puncher's work to do but he had no thought for that now. He struck out to the creek, then turned left toward the distant soddy.

It was past noon, and he had been in the saddle since early morning. Already his sense of triumph over what he had achieved had turned to doubt. He had no regret for having killed Squint Lister. That had been essential to his own survival. But the manner in which it had happened worried Ragan. He had killed and run because he had been obliged to run. Now he was worried about what Angel Younts might try to make of it.

He saw only one horse at the outcamp, and as he rode closer the ghost of a tired grin touched Ragan's mouth. A girl stood in the yard waving to him. Nancy Hanna! Ragan waved back and rode in, feeling better seeing the smile on Nancy's face. He touched his hat and swung down, watching her expression change to surprise as she noted his torn and dusty clothes.

"What happened to you?" she cried.

RAGAN didn't want to tell anybody about Squint Lister until he had had time to think it over. "Strayed off my range," he drawled, "and a orey-eyed buckaroo objected. But we got it straightened out."

"You learned anything, Chance?" Nancy asked eagerly.

"Only enough to persuade me Pace and Kitch are right in what they suspected," Ragan answered. To change the subject, he asked, "You didn't bring this bunch of cows up all by yourself?"

Nancy shook her head. "Slim Gallatin helped, but didn't have time to hang around and wait for you. Dad and Kitch are pushing the beef cut to Baker City to turn over to a Wyoming driver. Said to tell you they'd haul up some feed as soon as they get back."

"Let's eat, Nancy," Ragan said.

"Suits me," Nancy answered.

She wore waist overalls and a boy's plaid shirt. Her hair was caught under a big hat, and her long-legged slimness pleased Ragan. He remembered her quick, heated defense of young Kitch and wondered again what was between the two. But Nancy wasn't going to have any trouble finding herself a husband when she got ready. She could just about take her pick, Ragan thought. Noticing his interest in her, Nancy flushed and walked into the dugout.

Ragan watered the roan, unsaddled, and turned the mount into the horse pasture. The string of mounts promised him would probably be coming in next, and he had a puncher's interest in having plenty of horses. Again he felt regret at what had happened only an hour or so back. Already it had disturbed and endangered his peace of mind. He would have to make the long ride to Canyon City, as soon as he could, and tell the sheriff the whole thing.

Nancy had a fire going by the time Ragan got back to the dugout. She said, "If I'd had any idea when you'd get back, I'd have had dinner waiting. What'll it be?" She dimpled and Ragan laughed because that was a redundant question in a cow camp. Nancy was already opening a can of beans. There would be bacon and coffee and maybe some frying pan bread.

Ragan decided to let her handle it and seated himself. Pulling out his tobacco, he realized how shaky his hands still were. It dawned on him that, weakling though he considered himself to be, he had been locked in a life-and-death struggle with a vicious killer and come off best. Yet his response to that achievement wasn't good. He smoked and watched Nancy.

He was considering telling her about the encounter with Squint just to have somebody who could talk on his side of the argument. But that would do no good, he realized, for Nancy had not been an eye witness. Moreover, what he could tell her at this point might be dangerous to her. He decided to keep quiet until he had seen the sheriff.

## CHAPTER VIII

### *A "Pard" Shows Up*

WHEN Nancy had the food on the table they sat down to eat together. Now, a little rested, Ragan began to feel easy again. Nancy, whose spirits always were buoyant, chatted while she ate, telling Ragan the latest news from down below. There was nothing really new or exciting but it was the kind of talk the cow country people liked to pass around.

Then Nancy said, "Chance, why have you stuck up here so close? We'd like to see you once in a while. And—they're still having dances in Cottonwood."

Ragan felt a flush climb up his face. "Been busy," he grunted.

Her eyes were watching him closely when he looked up again. She said, "Chance, don't turn bunch quitter."

Ragan frowned. That didn't anger him the way it had when Angel Younts had called him a cut-back. A bunch quitter was a different kind of animal, simply one that refused to run with its kind, struck out for itself and kept apart. Maybe he had already turned into one. Ragan didn't know, except that he had no desire to do the things she had suggested. He wanted, he liked, to be alone. And this was new to Ragan, something he had brought back with him from Portland.

"It's not that," he lied. "I kind of went on a drunk up here, you might say. Doing things I couldn't do for a long while. Things I didn't know if I'd ever do again."

Nancy nodded. "I saw the wood pile and the patching you've done to the buildings. Kitch is more than getting his money's worth out of this."

Ragan looked at her closely. "Made you sore the day I called Kitch a fuzz-cheek, didn't I?"

Nancy's face turned rosy. "Why not? Wasn't that the same as calling me an unweaned kid? Kitch and I are the same age."

Ragan stared. He hadn't considered the possibility that he had offended her more than he had insulted Kitch. He chuckled, saying, "You're grown, all right."

"I'm glad you realize it," Nancy said. "But you changed the subject. I wish you'd come down and mix with folks once in a while."

"Why, I will," Ragan said.

"That's a promise, Chance. I'll hold you to it."

"All right," Ragan agreed.

Nancy insisted on helping him wash the dishes, then took her departure, saying what he had surmised, that Gallatin would be back with a little string of horses within a day or two. Ragan, with something like relief, watched her ride out for home. Reaction to the fight in the mountains was heavy on him now. His bones ached, his nerves were on edge, and there was a feeling of deep revulsion within him. He couldn't put himself through many more experiences like that, yet he had as good as tweaked the devil's nose.

Ragan didn't strike out for Canyon City the next morning as he had intended. The herd, nearly three hundred head of cattle, would have to be watched closely until it was settled up here. Once it was, nothing short of a storm or stampede could cause it to drift away. Cattle were like that, with some instinctive attachment to terrain that was almost a magnetic influence.

So Ragan saddled and rode completely around the flat, throwing back a few animals that had poked off into the defiles. But autumn grass had started and mainly the bunch was content to keep to the flat and the handy, abundant water.

Ragan had barely got back to headquarters when Slim Gallatin came in, leading four strung-out horses. The Spade had furnished them and hadn't worked off any sorry critters on Ragan, which gratified the tall, gaunt cowhand.

GALLATIN was a gawky, good-natured man who rode for the Spade. He stayed to have dinner with Ragan, then struck out for home. His own riding done for the day, Ragan's idle mind began to worry again. Maybe he should have had

Gallatin stay with the cattle a couple of days while he went to Canyon City. But the Spade was already shorthanded, Gallatin had conveyed, with Kitch and a couple of riders off on the market drive to Baker City with Pace Hanna. So Ragan had to wait until, stirred by Younts' report of his rider's death, the sheriff sought him.

It puzzled Ragan when three days passed without a visit from the peace officer or anybody else. Younts wouldn't dare try to conceal the death of even a hardcase like Squint Lister, though Ragan had considered the fact that Younts might fear to bring the law in here because of that obvious rustling hole in the mountains just behind the Fork. But when nobody showed up on Squabble Flat, Ragan began to wonder if Lister could have pulled through, as some of that tough breed could.

Ragan decided to sit tight as long as Younts did. If he went to the law voluntarily he would have to divulge all that was suspected about the Terrebine Meat Company, aborting the chance of catching the rustlers red-handed, and of drawing Arch Terrebine into it.

So Chance Ragan began to feel easy again, to hope that Lister had managed to pull through. Meanwhile, Ragan worked with his cattle, his horses, and once more began to feel strength coming back to his wasted body. He remembered his promise to Nancy. He wouldn't do it yet, but one of these times he would ride down to visit her and Pace. Maybe, if Kitch didn't have her sewed up, he would take Nancy in to Cottonwood to a dance.

He hadn't got around to that when bad weather broke with little warning. It had been growing cooler and Ragan one evening noted the low, ragged overcast coming in from the southwest. By dark, lowering cloud masses began to pile on the horizon. During the night, he awakened to hear the steady drum of rain on the splitshake roof. Ragan smiled, welcoming it, for this was the kind of weather the Terrebine Meat Company needed to resume under-cover operations.

It was still raining at daybreak, when Ragan awakened again and got out of the bunk to dress. When he looked out the door he saw the drenched flat, with the mountains all about lost in mists. Ragan turned back, built his morning fire, and had barely finished breakfast when a horse came into the yard.

Ragan's surprise doubled when he looked out the window to see Arch Terrebine swinging down from his horse. The man wore a slicker and rain hat, both of which were streaming wet. To have reached here this early in the morning, Ragan knew, Terrebine must have passed the night at the Fork.

Terrebine swung toward the dugout with his arrogant walk. Ragan moved over and opened the door. Terrebine gave him a cold smile.

"Howdy, Chance," he drawled. "Hell of a day to go visiting, ain't it?"

"Any day's a poor one for you to come to see me, Arch," Ragan answered softly.

The man showed no surprise at the truculence. He brushed past Ragan, entering the soddy. There he unlatched his slicker and shrugged out of it. He tossed it, wet as it was, onto Ragan's bunk, the hat following. Ragan promptly raked them off onto the floor.

"Figure you throw a big shadow now, don't you, Arch?" he inquired. "The rain bring you here?"

"Why would it?" Terrebine asked narrowly.

"Time to start the profitable sideline, ain't it?" Ragan asked.

"Why, that's right," Terrebine admitted. "It is. And time we made a deal."

UNINVITED, he took seat at the table, spreading his arms forward and putting his weight on his elbows. He was stirred by some inner excitement that Ragan found disturbing. Fully aware that he was suspected and loathed, the man was still assured and unabashed in his private elation.

"So this time you'll deal," Ragan grunted.

"What do you mean?"

"When you or your man shot my horse in that blizzard," Ragan answered, "it wasn't what I'd call a swap."

"So you think I had something to do with that?" Terrebine murmured.

"There's no doubt of it. And it got you what you wanted. Full control of the business I was fool enough to go pardners with you in. Now what do you want of me?"

"Cooperation," Terrebine said promptly. "And I've as good as got it, Chance. You've been wondering about Squint Lister, maybe."

"Is he dead?"

Terrebine smiled. "The story I got from Younts is that Squint just up and drifted. He did, for all Younts knows. Squint ain't been around the last few days. And he's not apt to turn up again, Chance, if you string along with us this winter."

"By letting stuff leak through here?" Ragan said. "What if I act onery?"

"Squint Lister will show up again. The sheriff will dig him up. Where you buried him, Chance. Younts and Stub Eakin heard you threaten to send Squint home strapped to his saddle, the other night."

Ragan sat down, partly because of the weakness that assailed his knees, but mainly because he knew Terrebine was here to stay until he had gained his end—or tried to. Ragan pulled out tobacco and began to spin a cigarette, his face impassive. But he felt the cold touch of a deep and hidden fear, the worry that had ridden him since that fight in the mountains.

He couldn't prove that he had been more than justified in killing Squint Lister. He alone knew that the man had tried to kill him from the rimrock back of the dugout. No one but Ragan had stared into Lister's hate-filled, killer eyes and heard him renew the threat of ruthless death.

On the other hand, Ragan was the one who had been off-range when the killing occurred. Sticking together and telling the right story, Younts and his riders could frame Chance Ragan with ease.

Arch Terrebine, sensing these things, saw them have their effect on Ragan. Quietly grinning, he saw the cigarette that got half-finished then hung suspended in Ragan's motionless hands.

"So I just let rustled steers leak through here," Ragan said finally. "That all you want?"

"That's right," Terrebine said.

"Why'd you have Younts offer me a job?"

"To please a lady. And knowing what you'd say, Chance. It was a cinch you'd turn it down." Terrebine leaned back now.

"To please Joy Kildane," Ragan said harshly.

"That's right, friend. She was feeling sorry for you."

"Are you sure that's all?" Ragan murmured.

"Hell, yes. We're going to get married pretty soon. But that's beside the point. Can we count on you to sleep sound nights, up here, and not go blabbing to Hanna and Dunsan?"

## CHAPTER IX

### *Battle in the Soddy*

FOR the first time Ragan realized that Terrebine and Younts figured the winter holding on Squabble Creek to be a job made for Ragan by his friends. They had no idea that it had sprung out of suspicion of the Terrebine Meat Company. That suited Ragan, and he wanted to let it ride at that, as something which Ragan had figured out for himself. Pace Hanna and Kitch Dunsan and his riders would be far safer that way. On the other hand, their secret backing was an ace in the hole for Ragan.

"You know what I want to say, Arch," Ragan answered.

"But you won't, Chance. You don't dare."

"That's right," Ragan admitted.

That seemed to satisfy Terrebine, who rose. "Guess that lays the chunk for now. You're goaty, Chance, and maybe I don't blame you much. You'll try to beat us even yet, but we'll figure on that. You won't interfere with what goes on back up

here. And you won't carry tales. Because if you do Younts will go to the sheriff. He'll say it's been nagging him why Squint would up and ride off with pay coming, and right after you threatened the man for some strange reason of your own. Then he'll see that the sheriff digs Squint up."

"I don't doubt that Younts would," Ragan said.

"And your rustling charges wouldn't get anywhere," Terrebine concluded. "Because you ain't going to see any rustling, and we can always account for the stuff we're holding. We work it so we can. That hole you found in the hills is just for overflow. We're taking out that blind fence so there won't be a blamed thing suspicious about it."

"You ask a lot," Ragan said, "from a man you tried to beef."

Terrebine's gray eyes laughed at him. "You been imagining things, Chance," he said. "So long." He reached for his rain clothes.

The man had nearly reached his horse when the animal showed interest in something to the south of the dugout. Watching Terrebine's quick stare, while he paused in the sweeping rain, Ragan saw a puzzled worry begin to build in the good-looking face. Ragan couldn't see from the doorway, but wondered if his friends had chosen this kind of weather to bring up feed for the cattle.

As if in sudden decision, Terrebine turned back and said, "I'm hiding in the barn. You keep shut about me." He pulled back so that the dugout cut him off from whoever was coming in and led his horse at a swinging walk toward the barn.

When Terrebine had disappeared into the barn, Ragan stepped out to the yard and looked south. A horse was coming on in dogged patience through the rain. The small, hunched figure in the saddle at once suggested Nancy Hanna, though Ragan didn't place the horse. Ragan stepped back out of the wet because he wore no coat. A moment later the horse slogged into the yard.

"Why, Joy!" Ragan exclaimed.

She smiled at him. "I picked a fine day for it, didn't I?"

"You sure did, girl. Light down and get dry. I'll put up your horse."

"Never mind," Joy said, swinging down from the saddle. "I can only stay a minute." She dropped the reins and came toward the soddy door.

Ragan had forgotten the hiding Terrebine until a wicked pleasure shot through him. This was something for Arch Terrebine to see, as he doubtless was seeing through a crack in the barn wall. Ragan, letting Joy step past him into the dugout's warm interior, took the moment that her back was turned to lift his thumb to his nose and wag it toward the barn. Then he pushed the door closed.

JOY was silent while he helped her out of her wet slicker. Then she pulled off her pork-pie hat. She wore a wool coat under the slicker, a turtle-neck sweater, and breeches and boots. She was dry but cold, and she moved to the stove, shivering. Ragan lifted the lid and poked in fresh wood, waiting for her to divulge the reason for this foul-weather, early-morning visit.

"I made up my mind to come last evening," Joy said. "And I wouldn't let a little thing like rain stop me."

Ragan remembered, then, her parting words on her other visit, her request that he refrain from visiting the Teeter until she had seen him again. This was it. She had ridden out in a storm-swept dawn because her mind, at last, was made up. Ragan watched her with warming eyes, and she watched him levelly, waiting.

Ragan wouldn't have put a hand on her at that moment, wanting only to stand and look at her and drink in his wild delight. But a shadow fell upon the window. Joy's back was turned to it. Ragan's face never changed expression as he discerned Terrebine out there, openly spying, his handsome face black with suspicion. So Ragan stepped forward.

Joy murmured, "Chance—not too fast!" but Ragan swept her into hungry arms. For a moment she was rigid, then her arms crept about his neck, and her hands pulled

his head fiercely to increase his pressure on her lips. The light in the window grew brighter. The figure out there was gone.

Joy whirled away from Ragan as the door whipped inward. She gave a startled, choking cry, "Arch!" Then she covered her flaming face with both hands.

The naked passion Terrebine had seen had driven him berserk. He snarled at the girl, wheeled and lunged at Ragan. Abandon, almost as crazy, had come over Ragan. It had released something in him, an intoxication, a surging if false sense of power.

Ragan lunged for Terrebine, who had clawed his way out of his slicker. The man had expected to attack, not to be attacked. Ragan smashed him back against the door. Terrebine grunted in pain. Seizing the streaming brim of the man's hat, Ragan jerked, pulling the hat down over Terrebine's eyes. He let go and punched his fists again and again into Terrebine's belly. The man cursed and clawed at his hat. He jerked it free and let it fall.

His eyes were pits of fury as he gagged for breath. Ragan smashed into him again, driving another blow to Terrebine's belly. Ragan had completely bewildered Terrebine for the moment, hammered him to a baffled, defensive halt. He sent the man crashing back against the wall again.

Terrebine made a wrenching shove, driving off the wall. He whirled, seized a chair, and swung it high. Joy cried out in a whimpering voice. Terrebine hurled the chair at Ragan, who bent and let the missile crash on the back wall. Terrebine swore again in a wild, frustrated rush of sound.

He grabbed the other chair in the room and hurled it with the same annihilating abandon. It missed Ragan and smashed into a shelf, bringing down the shelf's burden. The articles hit the floor with a drawn-out crash. Terrebine shook his head, his shoulders bunched, then his head began to wag from side to side.

Ragan gave him a cool and wicked grin. Terrebine sprang in, lashing out with both fists in steaming uppercuts. A blow caught Ragan on the mouth, skidding upward into his nose, hammering him back against the wall. The pain of the blow climbed up to explode in Ragan's brain. Terrebine straightened, lifting on his toes as he poured on a steady assault.

Ragan knew a moment of sick distress, of bleak despair. It seemed inevitable that he would go down. Covering, bobbing, he managed to evade the lethal blow Terrebine tried to send in.

In desperation Ragan drove forward with a bent body and lowered head. His momentum carried him through Terrebine's barrage. He hit Terrebine's heaving chest with the top of his head and his impetus slammed Terrebine the width of the room and into the hot stove. The man let out a terrible yell, flailing wildly with his hands to gain balance and thus shoving both palms against the hot top of the stove. He tangled himself as he came off the heated surface of the skidding stove. He fell as the stovepipe came down. The room was filled with soot and smoke and Terrebine's bitter cursing.

BLOOD streamed from Ragan's smashed nose, and he knew he was in another fight for his life. He was indifferent to that because this was the man who already had caused him so much pain. He was essentially weaker than Terrebine, and he lacked the man's killing rage.

Terrebine came up in a rush. Ragan shoved aside, but Terrebine pivoted and came on, his drive scarcely broken. Ragan slugged wildly at the man's face. Terrebine lashed out with his foot, trying for Ragan's crotch. Ragan jumped back from it in a narrow miss. He was gasping for breath, his lungs seemed on fire, his strength was about gone.

Terrebine struck out, spinning him against the wall. His head hit a peeled log and flames leaped in his brain as it kindled from his heaving lungs. He began to cough, and remembered the smoke pouring from the dislodged stove. Though he saw Joy Kildane's blurred shape again and again, he had forgotten her.

Then Terrebine had his arms around

Ragan, shoving him back onto the table, which was impacted against the back wall. Terrebine began to bend Ragan backward, his knees and legs keeping Ragan's lower body upright. Ragan strained to break the hold, to halt the thrust of a shoulder that seemed bent on breaking his back. He could hear Terrebine grunt with the strain as he wrenched again and again.

Ragan's back kept bending until his belly was stretched tight. He kicked then, dragging back a foot and driving it hard against Terrebine's ankles. The man's boot sole skidded on the floor. Ragan kicked again and knocked the man's prop from under him. Terrebine threw his weight onto Ragan's shoulders but now Ragan bent sideward, slipping out of that fearful back arch. He swung his hips and jerked free.

Terrebine came after him doggedly, swinging swift, slamming blows that Ragan could neither smother nor duck. He would have quit then if there had been any quitting in him. He was finished. Wildness, even a roaring jealousy over a woman, had carried him into a fight he might have known he could not win. He fumbled, he hung on, and with blurred eyes watched his assailant grow confident.

Terrebine backed him into a corner and proceeded without mercy to belt him around. Ragan made one grim try to get away from it. He shoved out from the wall and drove a smashing blow into Terrebine's face. It split the man's cheek, snapping back the sweaty, bloody head. But Ragan hadn't anything to follow it with. The impetus of his punch carried him forward. He fell into Terrebine and grabbed. For a moment Terrebine seemed to rest on him in the same manner.

Then Terrebine raised his shoulder suddenly, and Ragan's gasping mouth clicked shut. Terrebine put the full force of his body into it. Ragan went over backward, dragging Terrebine with him. They fell in a thundering crash. Then Terrebine was astride Ragan and hammering at his head again. That was as far as Ragan kept track of it.

When he regained his senses the cabin was cold. The door stood ajar, the rain still pelting past. Ragan was on his back and full of pain and sickness and racking shame.

He was afraid to open his eyes for he remembered Joy Kildane and had no least wish to see her eyes upon him now. But the door was open. He could feel the draft and hear the close, sharp drum of the rain. If Joy was here she would have had the sense to close the door.

## CHAPTER X

### *Spread-Eagled*

OPENING his eyes, Ragan found that he was alone in the dugout. The wind that had chilled the place had cleared it of smoke and the fire was out. They had been gone a long while, Joy and Terrebine. They had left him on the floor and hadn't troubled to close the door. That had been Joy's concern for the man she had seen whipped into impotence and on into senselessness. They hadn't even shut the door.

Ragan managed to sit up, but that was as far as he could go for a time. His face was a bloody mass, his clothes were nearly ripped from his body. He had had a hell of a beating, which he had asked for himself. But a year ago he could have killed Arch Terrebine. Ragan knew that. It had been a fact. But this, too, was a fact—this Ragan.

He finally got his feet and braced himself by the table, which still stood on its legs. Then, because he couldn't come fully straight, he lurched out through the door in a bent-over crouch. The rain splashed on his hot skin and he turned up his face and let it hit him. Then he stumbled on to the spring and there began to scoop water with his hands to bathe his feverish face. He kept this up for a long while, at last feeling the strength coming back into him.

He was like this when, without his knowing it, a wagon pulled up behind him.

Somebody called, "Chance! What on earth's been going on here?"

Ragan stumbled to his feet and stood swaying. There was a team and wagon. There was a tarp on the wagon, and his numbed mind finally told him it would be feed for the cattle. The girl who had called to him was Nancy, and Pace Hanna was with her this time. Pace was swinging down off the seat, his eyes blazing. Not at Ragan. Pace was some hot about this, and Ragan tried to laugh at the man.

"Feller was here," Ragan drawled. "We got into a discussion. We got it settled. It's all right."

"Who?" Pace thundered.

"Never mind." Ragan said it so sharply that Pace Hanna said no more.

Ragan walked back to the dugout, the wagon rumbling along behind him. He paused to dip water from the bucket on the bench and drink thirstily. He was feeling better physically. And he was damned if he was going to tell them a word about what had happened, not because of Terrebine's threat about what would happen if he broke silence, but because of his shame. Chance Ragan wasn't *mucho hombre* any more, and Chance Ragan had found that out.

Pace drove the wagon on to the barn, Nancy accompanying him. They had the sense to leave Ragan alone for a while, and Ragan appreciated that. They would unload the wagon, and he meant to use the time to straighten up the shack. He went in, closing the door. He skidded the cool stove back into place, worked frantically to put up the pipe. He picked the litter off the floor and piled it any old way on the remaining shelves. He looked at the two smashed chairs, then laughed. What in hell was the use of trying to hide the work of a tornado? He let it go and began to kindle a new fire.

He had coffee started by the time Nancy came in by herself. She said, "Do you know you ought to see a doctor? Your nose must be broken."

"Mend," Ragan said.

She came forward. "Chance, it's the second time I've come here to find you mussed up. Who is it?"

"Man," Ragan said. "He don't like me.

## The First Stage Route

THE longest stage-route in the world, and the first rapid-line across the United States, was the great Overland Route, operated in the 1850's by John Butterfield and a group of associates.

The terminals were St. Louis and San Francisco, but because of pressure from Congress and the White House, the route adopted went far to the south, through the Indian Territory, Texas and Arizona. The distance traveled by the stagecoaches was 3000 miles, through high mountains, great deserts and much territory held by hostile Indian tribes.

The stages ran by a regular timetable, and though allowed 25 days for the trip, usually accomplished it in 21 days. The through fare was $150, which did not include meals, and the U. S. Government paid Mr. Butterfield and his partners $600,000 a year to carry tri-weekly mails.

The line continued to operate successfully until the outbreak of the Civil War. After that, the Wells-Fargo Company, which was composed of the same stockholders, established a new, central route through Salt Lake City and Nevada. —*Doris E. Pogue*

I don't like him. We sort of fight when we see each other."

"Terrebine," Nancy breathed.

"Is it?" Ragan asked. "Lots of men in this country, kid."

"All right," Nancy said. "Will you ride down to Susanville and see the doctor?"

"No," Ragan said.

HE DIDN'T say anything when Nancy pitched in to finish cleaning up the place. That was a chore which just hadn't occurred to Joy Kildane. He wouldn't let anybody know that if it hadn't been for a man hiding in the barn, he might have had Joy Kildane this day. Nancy would laugh at him, and Nancy would be completely right. It was funny.

Pace Hanna wore a slightly forced joviality when he came in presently. "Get you another load of feed up here before snow," he said casually.

"Fine," Ragan said. "I'll need it. Coffee pretty soon, Pace, if Nancy'll shake the lead out."

"Why, you—" Nancy began, then she smiled at Ragan. "All right, be a big mystery and see if we care!" she retorted.

The Hannas didn't stay long, and Ragan was grateful for that. They had barely pulled out with the wagon when he toppled onto the bunk and fell asleep. All gone, even beyond feeling sorry for himself, he drifted once more into blackness. . . .

It was the dawn of another day when he opened his eyes again. His first waking thought was that of a puncher, remembering that he hadn't taken a look at the cattle since the day before yesterday. He tried to roll off the bunk with something like his old spirit and fell back with a groan. But it was only soreness now. The fever had quit him, the roaring head. He rolled onto his side, swung his legs out over the bunk's edge and sat up.

He could hardly move, and the split, raw knuckles of his hands made it next to impossible for him to bend his fingers. Ragan had slept in his torn, bloody and filthy clothes, hadn't even pulled off his boots.

He got up and staggered to the stove and managed to get a fire started. There was coffee left in the pot, and he pulled the pot forward on the stove to heat. He got a can of beans and knew he couldn't make his hands do the work of opening it. His lips were pulp, anyhow, his nose a purple and swollen mass. One eye was closed, and he knew the other would be black from the shock to his nose.

He wasn't going to let any doctor work on him. Ragan had had enough of doctors.

When the coffee was lukewarm he filled a cup. He fished out tobacco but dismissed the job of making himself a smoke. He drank the coffee black. Then with sore, slow movements, he got into a sheepskin coat. The rain had tapered to a light drizzle, but a cold wind howled outdoors. Ragan went down to the barn and managed to get a saddle screwed onto the horse he kept there. He led it outside and let it drink at the spring tank. He groaned as he swung up into the saddle. Then he rode out on his job.

Ragged clouds still chewed into the ridges of the encircling mountains, and the sky was a dirty overcast. The wind picked up a hum as it came full across the open flat, the cold painful to Ragan's battered features. He rode with bent head when he could, but kept his eye on his work. There was nothing wrong with the cattle, save for the few strays that were inevitable. The bunch quitters.

Ragan remembered that Nancy Hanna had asked him not to become a bunch quitter. He laughed into the wind, for he was worse than that. He was the cut-back Angel Younts had called him.

Even before he reached the ravine that had led him into trouble with Squint Lister, Regan was suspicious. The mud beyond was churned in a massed way different to the tracks his own steers would lay. Last night or the night before, a drive had come in, a little rustlers' wad shoved on up to the hole in the hills.

So it was under way! Angel Younts had resumed his winter's operations, confident of Ragan, unafraid of him.

"And what will you do about it?" Ragan

asked himself, sitting his horse in the drizzling rain. "Who'll you tell? How'll you stop 'em without going over the road yourself?"

THERE had been enough heavy rain, since the drive, to rob the new sign of freshness, which rendered it harmless to Angel Younts. Ragan had no desire to investigate the hidden hole in the hills again, but he had to know what brands had been moved in there during the storm. That would help him to dissolve a bafflement in his mind—the manner in which Younts was working his neighbors' ranges and the routes he used to come in up here from below.

Younts had to be caught in the act of stealing, so Ragan knew he had to risk another visit to the rustlers' hole. That would be doubly dangerous because of his previous investigation and the fact that it probably had induced Younts to put a guard on the hole.

His decision reached, Ragan searched his memory of the vicinity for a different way of getting to the hole so as to avoid the danger of stumbling into another tight. Presently he swung his horse to the right, going on along the flat where the hills toed in upon it in a meandering line. A little later he turned south along a deep ravine with pine on the hills at either hand. The wind slacked off. The soaked earth was spongy under the horses' hoofs. The evergreens blended their pungency into the fragrance of the new-washed air. The drizzle was just enough to be cooling to his punished, fevered face.

His body slack and aching in the saddle, Ragan pondered a deeper mystery, a matter that had puzzled him ever since he came home to hear that Arch Terrebine had opened his own chain of butcher shops in the scores of mining camps in the Blues.

Terrebine had had no capital of his own beyond what was needed for buying cattle, at the time the big trouble had come to Chance Ragan. Yet, in less than a year Terrebine had bought out his partner, had managed to open all those shops. He had had nothing to put up as security for a bank loan and was not the type of man a banker would finance out of respect and faith. Ragan strongly suspected that some private interest in the country had backed Arch Terrebine right down the line.

In any event there were a number of cattle ranches in the lower country that were being bled white without knowing it. Loss was hazard enough in beef production, loss from die-offs, from injury and inclement weather, from grass and water shortages. The margin that enabled a stockman to make it was always fragile and narrow. Heavy rustling, undetected long enough, could put most ranches squarely on the rocks.

And Ragan knew that the whole Triangle, enjoying a false sense of prosperity, was seriously imperiled. Beaten as he was in body and in spirit, this urgency drove him on, lifting him above personal concern and above personal seeking. It was a relief to have something to believe in, to fight for, at last.

An hour's riding brought him into hogbacks he believed to be due east of the rustlers' hideous flat. There he swung west, following a wet ridge through tangled country marked only by the trails of the wildlings. Shortly his judgment was vindicated, for he found himself on top the bench east of the big hideout. He shielded his eyes, searching for cattle. But the flat was empty.

Ragan pondered that. He was certain that he wasn't wrong about rustled cattle having been moved during the storm. So the Terrebine Meat Company must have decided that this flat had become too dangerous to use, or else the cut had been small enough to sift in with legitimately held cattle immediately. Ragan leaned to the latter supposition since Terrebine had announced the intention of pulling out the screening fence at the mouth of the entering canyon so that anything found there would not appear in a suspicious light.

In any event, Ragan knew that he wasn't going to read any brands today. He turned back, feeling the weight of his disappointment.

## CHAPTER XI

### *Slow Bleeding*

UPON the Squabble Creek flat again, Ragan made the long, circling ride around its edges. The creek was shallow enough to be crossed at will, so that the banks were not apt to tell him anything. And the ravines could tell him nothing, either, because of the badly weathered sign. But Ragan poked about doggedly, not returning to the dugout until nearly noon.

He was hungry by then and had worked the malaise from his body except for the physical soreness. He tended to his horse, then tramped across to the shack and made his sore, stiff hands kindle a fresh fire. This time, slowly and clumsily, he cooked a meal for himself and ate it. The food restored him surprisingly. And though it took patience to twist a lumpy, misshapen cigarette he managed it and satisfied a gnawing hunger that had been in him through the morning.

He was relaxing thus when one of those full-grown ideas a man calls a hunch thumping into his conscious mind.

"Water," he thought. "Maybe there's other ways they're using it."

The thought was as stimulating as a stiff drink of whisky. One of the blessings enjoyed by the Triangle was its many hill-born creeks. Ragan was not thinking now of the major, year-round streams, though, but of the many washes that flashed into flood in a heavy rain. Terrebine's crooked organization was using one such wash in connection with the hideout hole in the hills. There were others, and Ragan remembered some that, flooded, would make perfect avenues in the downcountry for the flow of stolen cattle.

Squabble Creek itself could be driven in that manner if the drivers wanted to do it. So, then, the traffic system Angel Younts and his riders were using could be Squabble Creek and its drainage basin. That fit what he had learned of their operations. Ragan's cigarette went out in his preoccupation as he extended his thinking. Squabble joined Wildcat Creek, likewise a shallow, sedimentary stream. Together, the two streams gave access to every spread in this part of the Triangle, the self-erasing trails of vanishing beef stock as the spreads were slowly bled.

Ragan knew now he had to talk with Pace Hanna and Kitch Dunsan at once, even at the risk of running afoul of the law over the killing of Squint Lister. The thought of making the long ride to the Ladder was an agony in Ragan's mind, but he had to make it.

He caught up a fresh horse, saddled, and rode out at once. He had elected a new route for himself, going down the flat, meandering course of Squabble Creek. Though new to him, he found it to be as he had conjectured. At least at this stage of the winter, a horse could travel all the way down without much difficulty, keeping to the water for long stretches and with only short blockages to be circumvented.

It was these interruptions that crystalized Ragan's conviction, places where downfall or short waterfalls rose in the way. Here Ragan found cattle tracks, ageless as far as could be determined, and he found cattle droppings. Too much sign to be the calling cards of stray steers, and with horse tracks mixed in. Ragan congratulated himself. The chances were enormous against one of the downcountry riders finding reason to make this ride. So Angel Younts probably had not worried about the few places where he could not avoid leaving sign.

Possessed of the knowledge he had wanted, Ragan pulled out of the creek in order to make time, turning north to the regular trail. This would let him down to the Spade range, and he decided to pick up Kitch Dunsan and take him on over to Pace Hanna's. For now they had only to set a trap on Squabble Creek at the next sign of bad weather, and they could take Younts or some of Younts' men red-handed.

Yet, as he came down out of the hills,

Ragan was growing dissatisfied with that plan. The only ones it would incriminate would be those actually caught with stolen cattle. Younts would disclaim his riders or, if Younts were caught in a trap, Arch Terrebine would renounce him. This led Ragan to consider another angle to which he had already given thought—the possibility of sending marked steers through the system as tracers to prove the full extent of the rustling operation. The answer, Ragan decided, would probably lay between those two prospects.

HE FOUND himself emerging at a point higher up on Squabble Creek than he had anticipated. Even as he broke out of the last defile to discover that he was on Teeter's back graze, he discerned three horsemen coming down along the toes of the foothills. Ragan would have whipped back into cover had he not been seen. The three riders straightened with interest, and one of them he recognized as Judd Kildane. Unusual as his presence was at this point, Ragan decided on boldness and waited for the riders to come up to him.

Kildane had a couple of his regular punchers with him, and all three men gave Ragan's battered face a close and surprised attention.

"Man!" Kildane breathed. "You've had it!"

Ragan said nothing.

Then Kildane grinned and said, "Howdy, Chance. You're sort of off your range, ain't you?"

"Sort of," Ragan admitted.

"Fishing?"

Ragan shook his head. "Tried a shortcut to the Spade, and it turned out like a lot of 'em do. After this, I'll stick to the trail." To change the subject, he said, "We had a fair rain."

"Sure needed it," Kildane admitted.

He was eyeing Ragan with some deep speculation in his mind. It could be dissatisfaction with Ragan's explanation of his presence here. Or maybe Joy had told him about that primitive and terrible fight with Arch Terrebine. Ragan wondered which. If Kildane should happen to let it drop to Terrebine that Ragan had been cruising the wild reaches of Squabble Creek, Terrebine would know that Ragan had ferreted out some more of the rustling plan. That was something Ragan didn't want to happen.

Considering the preoccupation in Kildane, Ragan said, "Seen Arch lately?"

"Why, no," Kildane said, and a scowl appeared on his face. "Why?"

Ragan grinned through puffed lips. "Just wondered if you'd seen the other half of the picture. You boys going my way?" When Kildane shook his head, Ragan spoke a farewell and rode off.

There was nobody at the Spade but the cook, so Ragan rode on for Hanna's Ladder alone. With his fall roundup finished and his market cut delivered to a Wyoming trail-driver, Pace was taking things easier. Ragan found him in the blacksmith shop, shoeing a horse. Pace looked up from his work, staring at Ragan in surprise.

"Boy, howdy," he greeted. "This wins me a bet."

"How come?" Ragan asked.

"Nancy bet me that if we ever got you down here we'd have to rope and drag you. Anything wrong?"

"That's a hard question to answer right," Ragan said, grinning at his friend. "But Younts made his first cut for the winter one of the last two nights."

He eased his tired weight onto an old horseshoe keg and told Pace of the rustlers' hole he had found in the mountains, of his brush with Squint Lister and how he had been obliged to kill the man to save his own life, and finally of Terrebine's visit and blackmail threat.

Pace whistled. "You been making hay, ain't you? Wild hay. Chance, you should have taken that killing straight to the sheriff."

Ragan nodded agreement. "I just never figured Younts would try to make anything like that out of it. So I expected the sheriff to be coming to see me, and then, there was the steers to get settled. What'd happen if I went to the sheriff now?"

"You got nothing to prove your side of it," Pace said worriedly. "Chance, I don't know. Lister wasn't worth the powder to blow him up, but he could get you in bad trouble even dead. But it looks like you mean to risk it."

"There's more than me in it," Ragan said. "There's you and Kitch and all the other spreads around here being bled white."

"And there's you in it, too," Pace said pointedly.

"That's right," Ragan agreed. "Neither Younts or Terrebine have troubled to deny they know why I went to the hospital. Sometimes I think I'd of been lucky if they'd beefed me instead of my horse. Man can't forget a thing like that. I mean to square it. But I can't till this rustling's straightened out."

PACE HANNA went on with his work. He extracted a red-hot horseshoe from the glowing coals in the forge, holding it gingerly with a long-handled tongs. He pressed the hot shoe to the horse's front hoof so that the hoof sizzled and smoked and gave off acrid fumes. Then Pace began to whittle and rasp the hoof, thinking.

Finally he said, "What we do about you and the law's a sticker. Since it's gone this far, I'd say sit tight. So what do you figure we can do about the rustling?"

"That's a lot easier," Ragan admitted. "Looks to me like we got to set one big trap. We've either got to take the law in on it or some of the ranchers who've been trusting Terrebine. How about Judd Kildane?"

"Judd'd hit the ceiling if he figured he'd been rustled," Pace said readily. "If we could get him suspicious enough to cooperate. But I reckon you've found out Terrebine has been making time with Joy. Kildane would take a lot of convincing. It's more than likely he'd just turn goaty and defend Terrebine and maybe gum it up for us."

"We could sure use Judd," Ragan said. "You three have got the foothill ranches and the easiest range for Younts to work at night. I thought maybe you could mark some prime beef somehow, then leave it where it'd be tempting and easy to pick up. If we could pull a raid that turned up marked stuff in that hole and down in Younts' sorting pens, we'd have Younts, anyhow. It'd be better yet if we could find some in one of the mining camp corrals, ready to go to the butcher. That'd ring Terrebine in."

"And take an army to pull off," Pace grunted.

"That's the trouble. But they've got a slick system that's going to be hard to beat. Besides running in some tracer steers, we might trap Younts' outfit in some back wash with steers they got no business with. That's what I come down about. To work it out. Think it over, Pace, and come up to Squabble Creek if you get a hunch." Ragan rose from his seat.

"Now, wait," Pace said. "You stay for supper, or Nancy'll skin me for letting you slip out of my clutches."

"She in the house?"

Pace nodded, grinning. "Catching up on her cooking, now that we've got rain to keep her indoors. Man hadn't ought to sire daughters in the cow country. They don't get the chance just to be a woman."

"I'll go see Nancy before I leave," Ragan said.

## CHAPTER XII

### *Woman's Intuition*

HANNA didn't offer to accompany Ragan to the house, and grinned after the beat-up man. Ragan, crossing the soggy yard, felt embarrassment climbing in him. He was surely in no shape to go calling on a girl, even a girl he knew as well as he knew Nancy. He moved across the porch, but Nancy beat him to the door.

"I saw you come in," she said. "And I had an idea you were going to leave without saying hello."

"I'm not my usual handsome self, just now," Ragan said. "What's that I smell?"

"It could be cookies, cake or cinnamon rolls. Which would you rather it was?"

"The works," Ragan said.

He left his slicker and hat on the porch and stepped into the kitchen. It wasn't often that he saw Nancy in a dress, and he liked what he saw now, a trim, supple young body in a plain but neat cotton housedress. He saw that she had put coffee on, probably when she saw him ride in, and presently he was seated at the table with her, filled coffee cups before them and a plate of cinnamon rolls between.

Ragan fell to with zest. He figured to let Pace tell her of his discoveries and the difficult proposition they faced. Right now he wanted to ease up and eat.

Nancy only confirmed Ragan's suspicion that she had fish to fry when presently she said, "Chance, you remind me of the man who left his shadow outdoors and, when he came out of the house, couldn't find it again."

"I do?" Ragan asked.

She nodded. "And you'll come out the same way if you keep hunting it. This fellow never found the one he left on the porch. But he didn't feel natural without it. So he wouldn't go out for anything. He just stayed in his house and starved to death. He never found out that the sun had moved and a new shadow would have been there waiting if he'd had the sense to try another door."

Ragan grinned. "I throw a kind of skinny shadow, but it still strings along with me."

"So I've got to be unsubtle," Nancy said, shaking her head. "You're hunting the old Chance Ragan, and you're not going to come out of your hole till you've found him. The trouble, my friend, is that time has passed, and you're going to have to find a new one."

"I've found him," Ragan said grimly, "and I don't like him. Besides, it's none of your business." She had put him on guard, defensive even, and he watched the flush climb into her cheeks and was glad to see it.

"I guess not," Nancy said. "But I'm given to talking out of turn. And tired of you sitting up on Squabble Creek licking your wounds."

"Now, look!" Ragan said, a little heat in his voice. He had jabbed her without anticipating that and would jab right back.

"Aren't you?" Nancy asked. "Would you be quite so ringy if you hadn't come back to find Arch Terrebine's all but got his brand on Joy Kildane? Don't reach for your gun. I like you and I have got more than an idle interest in the matter. I know you fought Terrebine, and not over rustling. Because I happened to see Arch Terrebine yesterday in Susanville. He looks at least as bad as you do."

"Nancy," Ragan said sharply, "it's still my business."

"I'm making it mine," Nancy returned promtply. "The next time you go up against Terrebine it'll be with a gun. I don't want you to kill or be killed over Joy Kildane. I've got a feeling about her. She's a little too primitive in her response to men."

Ragan set down his cup so hard the coffee sloshed out onto the clean, checked tablecloth. "Miss," he bawled, "when you're dry behind the ears come around with your wise offerings! Till then—!"

Nancy's mouth dropped open. "Why, you poor, beat-up fool!" she breathed.

Shoving up from the table, Ragan stared at her for a moment. "That's right," he agreed. "On every count."

"Chance, I never—I didn't mean—I wasn't—!" Nancy cried, but Ragan stamped out through the door.

PACE HANNA came to the smithy door and yelled, "Hey, wait a minute!" as Ragan swung into the saddle. Ragan didn't answer and he didn't look back as he went out of the ranchyard at a gallop.

Ragan went to work on Squabble Creek again. The rain stopped. The winter herd gave him no trouble, and the weather precluded activity on the part of Terrebine and Younts. Chance Ragan worked with a vengeance, furious at the merciless way Nancy Hanna had probed his wounds

without invitation. He didn't know what had prompted it and didn't care.

He wouldn't hear the small whispering deep in his mind that conceded the right to Nancy to get hot, herself, over his jibe at her immaturity. Once before he had got a rise out of her that way and should have known. He *had* known and had used that so it would go in as deep as he was himself penetrated by her criticism.

Work had to be made, but Ragan made it, determined to build himself back into a man. His hands healed, his face healed, everything but the lesion somewhere inside of him where its poisons kept him from a full recovery. Ragan rode to the forest and cut wood and banked it out. He cut enough poles to build the dugout into a fair-sized house. He drove the ax hour after hour and day after day. He began to sleep soundly, to eat with something like his old appetite. And he began to realize that he was training so that the next time he could whip Arch Terrebine.

He left the matter of catching the rustlers up to Pace Hanna. That was Pace's stake, Pace's and that of the other ranchers who were losing cattle. But Pace didn't come up to talk it over again, and Ragan decided that he had been angered by what Nancy had told him of their quarrel. The hell with Pace, Ragan thought. And he kept on working in the forest.

Kitch Dunsan came up, stopping only long enough to hand Ragan a month's pay in cash and to express his pleasure over the improvements to the line camp. But he was in a hurry and rode on, leaving the rustling matter still hanging in the air. Ragan contented himself with his own activities.

When a fortnight had passed, Ragan had recovered from the outward effects of his fight with Terrebine. He shaved for the first time since then and, when he had finished he still looked like a wild man, with his untrimmed hair. He lacked scissors with which to whack at it himself and suddenly knew that he was going downcountry for the sheer purpose of getting a hair-cut. He had money again.

He decided to go that day to Susanville which, because of the mining, had plenty of excitement to offer. Then Ragan got down to the truth. He would go to Susanville because it was frequented by miners, the floating element, and largely ignored by his old friends among the cattlemen. He would stay overnight, cut loose his wolf, and return the next morning.

The decision excited Ragan. He looked trim enough to anybody who hadn't known him when he had carried forty more pounds, and before he started to limp. There were girls in all the bigger gold camps in the Blues, girls without questions in their eyes and vinegar on their tongues. Girls with whom a man could make a simple deal and be done with it. Ragan began to anticipate a visit to Susanville.

He rode into the camp on the middle fork in the late afternoon. It was a boom camp, started in the sixties and still going strong, and he was somewhat familiar with it. His gaze searched the muddy main street for a barber's pole. Spotting one presently, he reined in at a tie-rack.

He went first to a mercantile and bought clean clothes, underwear and sox, Levi Strauss overalls and a new shirt. Entering the barbershop, he had a soak in the wooden tub in the back room, afterward having the hair-cut. When he came out onto the plank walk he felt better than he had in weeks. He put up his horse at a feed stable, then got himself a room in the Placer Hotel.

HE WANTED a drink before he ate supper and was also curious about something he had noticed on the street—the front of one of Arch Terrebine's butcher shops. The man had no special headquarters, Ragan had learned, and might be here at Susanville or in any other gold camp in the Blues.

Ragan walked into the butcher shop wondering what kind of a place Terrebine would run. What he found was in no way unusual. There was a big showcase of meat cuts, two big cutting blocks in the sawdust-covered space behind. There were meat hooks hanging from the ceiling

and a door opening into a cooler. The butcher, heavy and florid faced, was busy with two miners, slicing steaks from a round. Ragan noted the prices stuck on the cuts in the showcase and whistled. If Terrebine was picking up a few hundred free steers every winter, he certainly had developed himself a juicy proposition.

The miners tramped out with their purchases, and the butcher looked at Ragan. "Something?" he asked in a voice conveying that he didn't care but was obliged to inquire.

"Terrebine in camp?" Ragan asked.

"Over to the Placer, I reckon."

Ragan grinned and walked out. That was his own hotel. Something warned him, yet something else told him he was going to try again and keep trying until he had killed Arch Terrebine with his bare hands.

Night came to Susanville, marking the change by which a gold camp came always to its fullest life. Ragan entered the Nugget Saloon, growing slowly aware that his appetite for excitement, which had helped bring him to the camp, was of less depth than he had believed. A sense of boredom came upon him as he brushed through the batwings, a feeling of going through an old routine that somehow had lost much of its meaning. The racket within the place, the mixture of tobacco smoke and yellow lamplight, the drone of talk —none of it stirred in him more than a passing interest.

Ragan's jaded glance passed over the faces, the flaunted figures of the girls who worked in the Nugget, women whose business was the vagrant pleasure of rough men. Their pert amiability, their cheap and cultivated charm touched in him this night a fleeting sense of pity and then a washed-out indifference.

He moved idly to the bar, ordered his second drink so far on his visit, and nursed it more out of habit than thirst. He was puzzled and troubled by this apparent loss of vigor. It had to be ascribed to the thing that had broken him physically and, so thinking, Ragan began again to brood.

He hadn't consciously watched the backbar mirror except as movement automatically caught his transient attention. So when he saw a young couple come through an inner doorway, it was an instant before he lifted his head in interest, his notice sharpened by a familiar look to the cut of the man.

It was young Kitch Dunsan, Nancy's red-headed childhood friend. The girl with him was the prettiest Ragan had seen in the Nugget so far. The pair paused under the overhang of a stairway, in a cubbyhole formed by the walls of the room. The girl raised quickly on her toes, lifting up her face.

Kitch kissed her hastily, looking about uneasily. Then Kitch walked out across the room alone and left the place.

## CHAPTER XIII

### *Treachery*

AN ODD irritation twisted through Ragan. He had only a supposition that there was anything special between Nancy and Kitch Dunsan. Yet it angered him faintly to see the young fellow in the gold camp's market of flesh. The girl involved sauntered out across the barroom now, tall and dark and less flagrantly dressed than the other women were.

Nobody approached her, Ragan observed, and she had a look of complete indifference for the patrons. Ragan left his drink and walked toward her.

She was moving back toward the stairway. She had reached the bottom step when Ragan dropped a hand gently on her arm.

"Leaving us?" Ragan asked in a soft voice.

"Why, yes," she said, turning to regard him. Her voice was pleasant, and the gray eyes that looked at Ragan were cool and level. She quietly pulled her arm away from him and started on.

Ragan stood flat-footed, put in his place by a honkytonk girl. "I guess you are,"

he admitted, grinning up at her. She smiled and went on up the stairs.

A miner standing near rounded his lips in a soundless whistle. "Man, you're a stranger, I reckon," he drawled. "That's Dixie Beauchamp."

"Am I supposed to be awed by that?" Ragan asked.

"Warned, anyhow," the fellow snapped. "Her dad is the new owner of this place. She don't work in it."

"I'm warned," Ragan acknowledged.

He dismissed the incident as he went out to the street. The surge of wildness that had brought him to the camp was gone. Reason was restored, and he knew that he had to avoid Arch Terrebine for a while. His responsibility to the two ranchers who had hired him to winter on the flat, and to all the others who unwittingly were losing cattle, required him to sit on his personal desires for the time being. He considered getting his horse and riding back to Squabble Creek that night.

Not quite decided, he was nonetheless tramping down toward the feed corral when he saw Terrebine and Judd Kildane moving along the walk across the street, ahead of Ragan, and with their backs turned toward him. Ragan slowed his gait when the two men, in mid-block, cut a slant to his side of the street. They moved in through the horses strung at a rack ahead of Ragan. Instead of ducking under the tie-bar and emerging onto the walk, they halted.

Ragan was near enough to hear Terrebine say, "Damn it, Judd, he's got to be away from there then, and Joy's got to see to it that—"

At that instant Ragan came abreast of them. Light from a curtained window fell upon him, and it showed Ragan that the pair had halted at a horse wearing the Teeter brand, Judd's own. Both men gave a start of recognition as they discerned Ragan, passing on the walk.

"Wait, Chance!" Judd said hastily. "How come you strayed such a long piece from home?"

"That's what you asked me the last time," Ragan said mildly, halting at the hitching rail. His gaze briefly touched Terrebine but the man gave no sign of recognition. "This time it happened that I needed a hair-cut. So I come and got one. You heading out for home?"

"Not yet," Judd said, his voice sharpening at Ragan's gruffness.

"You're missing a chance at some good company," Ragan said, and he went on.

Within ten minutes he was riding out through the starlight toward the night-shrouded hills. He was disturbed, and as the miles fell behind him he tried to pick out the reason. There was nothing unnatural in Kildane's being with Terrebine, for the Teeter was the meat company's biggest supplier in the middle John Day.

But Ragan kept wondering what it was that Terrebine insisted Joy had to see to, who it was that he wanted away from some place at a certain time. Then Ragan's curiosity passed on to Kitch Dunsan, who seemed to have achieved kissing privileges with Dixie Beauchamp, daughter of a saloonkeeper. Ragan kept wondering if Nancy knew about Dixie, and how she would feel if she knew or suspected that Kitch was breaching the home graze.

RAGAN reached the Squabble Creek dugout too late to get much sleep, but he stretched out on his bunk for the few hours remaining before daylight. When he awakened it was to hear the drum of rain on the roof and to see it streaming past his window. He came awake with a galvanic start, for this meant that Angel Younts and his men were apt to be swinging their long loops for Arch Terrebine again. Pace Hanna hadn't come up to discuss a plan for trapping the rustlers, as Ragan had asked, and Ragan didn't feel like riding down to the Ladder after the bitter quarrel with Nancy.

Ragan fixed his breakfast, reviewing, while he ate, his visit to Susanville. He grinned with some asperity when he remembered the mood in which he had departed from home, and how it had turned out. He was astute enough to know that the frigidity that had come upon him was less the doing of his punished body than of

his mind. He was disinterested, and that was because an obsession had come to ride him, was making changes in him, and from some secret place in Ragan came a warning that he was drifting into deep water. He decided to see Pace Hanna and get action even if it meant another brush with Nancy.

He caught a fresh horse from the pasture and saddled it for the riding he had to do before he left for the Ladder. The outriding was uneventful, and within two hours he was back at the dugout ready to strike out. He changed horses and had just swung into saddle when a rider appeared out of the creek gorge at the lower end of the flat. Hoping it was Pace or Kitch, Ragan rode out to meet the man.

The visitor proved to be a puncher from Kildane's Teeter, a gaunt, dour individual Ragan knew only as Skinny. The man nodded and reached under his wet slicker for his shirt pocket.

"I was sent to fetch you a note, Ragan," Skinny drawled. "And bring back the answer, if any."

Ragan accepted the sealed envelope that Skinny held forth. The paper was pale blue and unaddressed, and the heart-beats in Ragan increased their tempo. He tore the end from the envelope and pulled out the note-paper it held. There was no salutation and no signature, and Ragan's eyes narrowed as he read:

> I was forced to leave the other day—practically dragged off. I'm sorry for what happened, and I've got to talk to you. I'll be alone tonight. Please come down and see me.

"The answer," Ragan said, "is maybe."

Skinny held out his hand. "I was to bring that back."

"Scared it might fall into the wrong hands, huh?" Ragan returned the note indifferently.

He wasn't disinterested now, as he watched Skinny ride away. He was angry, he was embarrassed, and yet he was on fire with desire to accept Joy's invitation. He understood this wild hunger in him, for he had thought about it steadily since the fight with Terrebine over Joy Kildane.

He had come to agree with Nancy on one point. Joy was wanton in her instincts, if not in fact. She wouldn't take Chance Ragan for keeps, nor would she let him go. But unquestionably she was keeping Terrebine in a similar quandary. Ragan wanted to contribute to that. He wanted to rendezvous again with Joy Kildane, and if it led to violence he wanted that.

The prospect altered Ragan's plans about going down to the Ladder. It was too soon to do anything definite about the rustling, he decided, and he didn't want to get tied up by that tonight. He off-saddled, returned to the shack and started a new fire. Pulling the coffee pot forward on the stove to heat, Ragan stretched, realizing that he felt good. There was relief in it, for vitality was surging in him, reminding him of how it had flamed that day before the fight. Basically, Ragan knew, he was no less a man than he had ever been.

"I'm going down there sure as shooting," he thought, then he rolled himself a cigarette to go with his coffee. The splashing rain grew pleasant.

PACE HANNA rode in an hour after that, and with him came Kitch Dunsan. Drenched and blown by the wind they tied their horses under the shed roof tacked to the barn and came on to the dugout. As Pace Hanna shucked out of his rain clothes he appeared reserved and a little distant to Ragan. But Kitch Dunsan was cheerful, excited and pleasant.

"It's time," Kitch said, "that we set out our trapline. Pace told me your idea about sending marked steers through Terrebine's system. Just what did you have in mind?"

"Sit down, men," Ragan said. He poured the last of the coffee into cups, then refilled the pot to start a new batch. He was conscious of a faint disappointment. After days of slacking off, these men were apt to crowd action at a point where Ragan had a private interest drawing his needle.

Then Pace Hanna explained the delay in a simple statement. "Well, it looks like you've got back on your feet and can make them chewed-up hands use a gun. Which they might have to. Terrebine and Younts

would beef the three of us before they'd give up their bonanza."

"We've got to knock 'em out with one punch," Ragan retorted. "Here's how I think we could do it. You men pick out some stuff close enough to market shape to catch a rustler's fancy. Settle it on your back graze where it would be easy to pick up. But mark each steer so the mark wouldn't be apt to be noticed."

"How's that?" Pace asked.

"Maybe you could take a stylus," Ragan said, "and scratch a little cross on a horn. Up close to the hair-line, maybe, or underneath. When the stuff shows up missing, all we got to do is find it in the meat company's possession. And, if possible, have the sheriff on hand when its found."

"That'd be easy," Pace said, "if we could persuade the sheriff he'd find what we claim. I know damned well Younts is altering my brand, and Kitch's, too. If we ring the sheriff in on it, he could raid some of Terrebine's slaughter houses, just as easy, and likely find hides that would show blotching."

"If they're as smart as I think," Ragan contradicted, "they're destroying the dangerous hides as soon as the carcass is skinned out. No, it's got to be live steers, marked so they can be identified. And if we don't use the sheriff, then its got to be some of the ranchers that have trusted Terrebine so far. Men whose word wouldn't be questioned and who'd be convinced by what we could show 'em."

Pace grinned slightly. "You still want Judd Kildane?"

"He'd throw the most weight with the rest."

"Tell him, Kitch," Pace said.

"I know a girl in Susanville," Kitch began. "She's sort of been spying for me."

"Dixie Beauchamp," Ragan said.

"That's right," Kitch said, staring sharply at Ragan. "Dixie hears things in the Nugget. Judd Kildane's in there a lot with Terrebine. She thinks there's something between 'em. More than Terrebine's hankering for Joy. Dixie thinks Kildane's got an undercover interest in the meat company. You're right about him throwing weight, Chance. It was his example and talk that got the other ranchers in a mind to contract with Terrebine and not squawk because he could afford to pay a bigger price than he does."

Ragan's face had turned wooden. "Judd in on—even the rustling?" he gasped.

"Why not?" Kitch asked calmly.

Ragan sat there for a long moment. He was shocked, yet strangely moved. "You're taking a mighty big jump, Kitch!"

"Not when you look at it," Kitch retorted. "Terrebine's everywhere. But every time he hits Susanville, Judd rides over to see him. A place cowmen stay away from mostly. And Dixie's heard enough talk between 'em to piece it together. Talk they probably can't make when Terrebine comes to see Joy at the Teeter, on account of her. And there's something more. Where'd Terrebine get the money to spread out? He didn't used to have it. And Judd inherited plenty, along with the Teeter, from his old man.

## CHAPTER XIV

### *The Temptress*

LEAVING Joy out of it, were they? That eased Ragan and was beginning to convince him. It did make sense, explaining how Terrebine had managed to finance his astonishing expansion. That had baffled Ragan. Suddenly he was remembering Terrebine's puzzling remark to Judd in Susanville: "Damn it, Judd, he's got to be away from there then, and Joy's got to see to it that—"

And now for the first time Ragan realized that the note from Joy today had asked him to come to see her, which in effect was for him to be away from Squabble Flat tonight. Whether she was in it, or out of it, Judd had got Joy to write that note!

In a hushed, tight voice Ragan said, "You've got me cornered. I reckon you're right. If you are, something's set for tonight. Something big. Because I've been invited away from here purty-please. I'm

going to go, but you men're going to stick around here on the quiet. From the way Terrebine talked to me, they figure you two set me up in business just to be good to me. He made it plain he don't figure you're suspicious of rustling. So if I show up where I'm supposed to go, they won't be expecting anybody to be here. And you can find out what's up."

"Where you going to go?" Kitch asked, grinning.

"It won't be under any stairway," Ragan retorted, and Kitch shut up promptly.

"They'll move cattle tonight," Pace said. "That's what they're up to."

"It's something special," Ragan answered. "They know I'm onto the rustling and figure they've got me hog-tied there. This'll be something they don't want even me to get wind of. Maybe it's got to do with Judd. That angle I just never seen. You men fixed to lay over here tonight?"

Kitch nodded, and Pace said, "Nancy knew we aimed to made medicine up here. If I don't get home right off she'll figure it's got to do with that and won't worry too much. We'll stay."

"And simply see what you can see," Ragan said. "We're not ready for a ruckus yet."

"Unless one's called for," Kitch objected with spunk.

"In which case," Ragan said, "give it to 'em."

"But we don't want to stay here the rest of the day," Pace said. "You're apt to be spied on. We better head out for home, then cut back into the timber and hide there till dark. Then we can come back down here."

"Better eat first then," Ragan said.

He cooked the noon meal, and when they had eaten Pace and Kitch saddled and rode out on the home trail. Ragan, knowing that the night might require much from him, stretched out on the bunk and slept. He awakened in the softening light of evening, ate cold food left from noon and was ready to ride down to the Teeter as soon as it grew dark.

Night was coming early now, at this

[*Turn page*]

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

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stage of autumn. Ragan presently was astride the roan and dropping down into the lower country. The rain kept up its steady drumming, promising that the night would bring the action that everybody seemed to want. Halfway down the long trail to the Spade, Ragan cut across country to the Teeter back range. The night was thick about him, the sky beclouded and lost above the storm. A couple of times he had to rein in and think out his bearings. Then at last he saw the lights of the Kildane spread below him.

Excitement leaped in Ragan. The big house was lighted as he approached, as was the long line of windows on the bunkhouse wall. "Lots of company," he thought, but he was elated.

He swung at the yard hitch-rack and tied his horse. The rain kept everyone indoors, and nobody greeted him. He went across to the ranchhouse and climbed onto the big porch.

JOY answered his knock, expectant, and pleased. Ragan saw at once that she had dressed carefully for him, wearing a white silk blouse and a long black skirt. Her dark hair was upswept, her feet, peeking from under the skirt, encased in flimsy, comfortable slippers. A subtle, heady perfume touched his nostrils as he stepped into the hallway at her bidding.

"I'm glad you came," she said, and smiled at him.

Ragan frowned, not putty in her hands, not satisfied as to a number of things. He shucked out of his slicker and tossed it back onto the porch, his wet hat following. Then, closing the door, he strode behind her into the big, lodgelike living room.

A man smiled at him from a chair by the fireplace. "Howdy, Chance," said Judd Kildane.

"Evening," Ragan grunted. If this was a rendezvous, he thought, it was a mighty public one. But it set his conviction that Arch Terrebine was behind it. Terrebine was willing to use Joy for bait. But he had no intention of letting the victim get the bait. His reaction at the dugout, the day of the fight, had proved that. "A good night to sit by the fire," he added to Judd.

Judd grinned ruefully. "It is that. But I've got to go out. Joy said maybe you'd be coming, so I waited to say hello. It's said, and I better get going." He rose from his seat, nodded, and left the room.

Joy gave Ragan a quick, intimate little smile but was silent. His own tongue tied suddenly, Ragan sat by the fire, warming his hands and feet. Presently he heard horses moving out of the ranchyard, a number of them.

"He's taking some of the boys," Ragan said.

"All of them," Joy answered. "We're quite alone."

Ragan swallowed. "If Terrebine planned it this way, I'm crazy," he drawled.

Joy, seated across the firelight from him, straightened in her chair, "Terrebine?" she asked sharply.

"Wasn't this his idea? At least my coming down here?"

The girl considered that. She had always had an odd candor, a way of playing her cards according to their strength. She murmured, "You and I have a habit of moving fast, don't we? All right. A part of this was Arch Terrebine's wish. That you be away from Squabble Creek tonight. Our being left alone here was not his idea—as you should know after that ghastly fight you had."

Rising to his feet, Ragan rasped, "So Judd's not the only one working with Terrebine. You're in on it. The whole rotten deal."

Joy rose and came to him, looking up as her eyes intently searched his features. "You could be, Chance. You ought to be. Instead of Arch Terrebine. You're the better man. You got the company started. You should be the one to profit from it now. I want you to have that chance, and that's what I'm working for."

"You'd better cut deeper into the deck, Joy," Ragan responded.

She kept that open inspection on his face, as if confident of what she discerned there, of what she could do with him. Then she said, "You owe it to me that you're alive today, Chance. Terrebine and

Younts wanted you killed after they found you'd got in their way. I know about Squint Lister and how he tried to do it. I put a stop to that sort of thing. But after Terrebine caught me at Squabble Creek and realized I'm interested in you, he was determined to do it. I've had all I can do to stop him. So—it's got to be you or him. I want it to be you, Chance Ragan."

RAGAN reached for tobacco, stunned and bewildered. "Judd's taken his crew to meet Younts or Terrebine," he said harshly. "They've got rustling to do tonight. Looks to me like Terrebine's still in it plenty, as far as Judd's concerned."

"So far," Joy agreed.

"How do you propose to get rid of Arch?"

"Maybe that's your problem, Chance," Joy answered promptly. "You've got reason enough. Judd's told me a lot of things since we started building some plans of our own. It was Younts who shot your horse, last winter. But at Terrebine's request. Judd will swear that Terrebine confided that to him if—if there should happen to be a settlement between you and those two."

"Ah," Ragan breathed. "You've planned it for me to kill Terrebine. You want what he's got in the way of a bonanza, but you'd rather have me when it comes to a man. Neat, Joy. What's up tonight?"

"I'll tell you," Joy answered, "because I think you're coming in with me and Judd. It's the biggest cattle steal ever pulled off in this country. Younts has been setting it up for weeks. He's picked up stuff from every ranch in the locality. Tonight they mean to move the whole works into that hole you found in the mountains. But Terrebine wouldn't risk your knowing about it. The big play is yet to come."

"What is it?" Ragan thundered.

"Terrebine means to stop buying cattle for a while. To cut off this country's beef market entirely. Except for the Spade and the Ladder, its grown completely dependent on Terrebine. He'll have the rustled beef to keep him going. The ranchers will be thrown into a panic. Terrebine can start buying again at half what he's been paying. Then he can stop the dangerous rustling, because he'll have the ranchers so weakened they can't help but accept what he's of a mind to hand them. He'd have a gold mine."

"Judd wants that all to himself?" Ragan asked.

"Judd and I and you want it, Chance," Joy said quietly.

"If the ranchers found all that cattle in the hole, they'd know Terrebine hadn't been buying in that quantity. They'd know it was rustled."

"They won't find it," Joy said. "You're the only outsider who knows about that hole or there'd have been trouble before now. And you won't tell, Chance. You're going to stay with me tonight. You're going to regain your place in the world with vengeance. Then you and Judd will be partners, and you and I'll be married."

"After I've gained a place in the world," Ragan said musingly.

"That's right," said Joy Kildane.

For a long moment Ragan watched her. "You poor damned little fool," he breathed. "You put too much stock in that body of yours." He was relieved that he'd said it at last.

"Go ahead, Chance," Joy said. "Say all the outraged things your conscience requires of you. Then come here. I want you to kiss me again. Like you did on Squabble Creek." She spoke confidently, and her eyes and her words were bold.

Ragan was anything but unaware of the taunting beauty of her, the full surrender, the rich promise—if he would meet her terms. He knew, too, that if this was to be the last rustling operation, it also would be the last chance to expose the criminals. Probably he had crowded them into making a final bold sweep. And in making it, they were exposing themselves, at least for a time. The thing had to be challenged now or it would be too late, with a whole cattle country on its knees and at the mercy of ruthless men. He threw a disgusted look at the waiting girl.

"Some other time, honey," Ragan drawled and started for the door.

## CHAPTER XV

### *My Lips Are Waiting*

NOT suspecting anything amiss, Ragan was wholly unprepared for what happened then. He saw Joy's expression change as her failure registered in her mind. He saw also that she had hedged against failure, for her hand slid down into the low neck of her shirtwaist. When it emerged, all in a second, it clutched a gun, a wicked little peashooter that could blow out brains as efficiently as a cannon.

"Oh, no!" Joy breathed. "One way or another, you're keeping me company!"

Ragan halted, the conviction in him that she would shoot him if he tried to leave. Her eyes said so, glittering eyes now, heated by the avarice she had disclosed so unhesitantly, and by the failure of her charms.

Swinging around, Ragan grinned. "You don't know men as well as I figured," he murmured. "A scared man just isn't a capable one, Joy."

"Go ahead," Joy answered. "Throw your insults. But you're staying. And if you keep so high and mighty, Terrebine will have to have his way about you. Sit down, Chance, and make yourself comfortable."

Ragan sauntered toward the chair he had used previously. Seating himself, he gave her his slow smile. He patted a knee and murmured, "Come here, Joy. We'll start over."

"Hell with you!" Joy breathed. "You showed your feelings for me!"

"Come here. Keep that peashooter on me if you want, but come here."

She took a faltering step toward him, and Ragan saw longing tug at her mouth. Ragan's eyes were laughing as he watched. But his mind was on that little gun. It was good for but one shot. She kept it pointed at him, at his chest. Yet she wanted his touch and he knew it, and she took another step.

Ragan went forward, a shoulder tipped down. He heard her gasp, then his weight hit her. He had the wrist of her gun-hand, shoving it aside as they fell together to the floor. She tried to wrench away from him, quick, and surprisingly strong. Ragan rolled his weight so as to press her flat to the floor. The only sound she made was a small, continuing moan. She rolled her head as he sought her lips. Then he got them and pressed his kiss to them and the gun dropped out of her hand from her own drained will.

Ragan caught up the gun as he rose. "Terrebine's," he drawled, "and welcome to you, if he lives to collect."

This time Ragan went through the door.

There was a dim light in the bunkhouse, but he knew the place was deserted. He pulled on his hat, got into his slicker, then swung onto his waiting horse. The night's storm still came down upon the Teeter and on all the range. It was the big night, Ragan knew, and he knew other things. An elation was in him, for he was free of Joy Kildane. Once more it had been his will and not hers that had separated them and this time for keeps. Beyond that he now knew that it was Younts who had shot his horse during the blizzard at the behest of Terrebine, bringing on all the trouble for Ragan. Action now, and maybe Chance Ragan would have peace.

He tried to plan while his horse thundered through the night. He knew that Judd Kildane had waited at the Teeter to be sure that Ragan showed up there. Cynically, considering that Joy was his sister, he had complacently left it to her to keep Ragan there, if not to undermine his moral fibre and entice him into their scheme. If that should fail, Judd had, like Joy, put his final reliance in her little gun. Judd Kildane had not known the weakness in Joy that Ragan knew.

Kildane and Terrebine and Younts would proceed unsuspectingly with the night's work. Ragan didn't want to stop that work; he wanted it to go forward as planned. But he wanted to see Pace Hanna and Kitch Dunsan and make counter plans.

Afraid to take the regular trail to Squab-

ble Flat, Ragan cut across country, imposing upon himself the task of finding his way through a jet-black night. A couple of times he pulled down his horse in uncertainty, but each time was able to make out some nearby landmark to give him a rough idea of his bearings. Then at last he was in the clearing his own ax had made in the pine above the dugout. Now, sure of himself, Ragan rode on, dropping down to the flat just back of the line camp.

THE PLACE was totally dark, nor was there any sign of life out on the flat. But it was early in the night, and it would probably be in the small hours of the morning before the rustled cattle reached the flat on the way to the rustlers' hole. Ragan reined in and called a low greeting to the dugout. When the hallo was answered he rode in.

Since Kildane had seen him comfortably settled at the Teeter, Ragan doubted that a watch was being kept on this place. But to be on the safe side, he rode up behind the barn, placed his horse inside it, then kept carefully to the shadows as he made his way on to the pole shack. He spoke again before he exposed himself at the door, calling, "Pace?" Pace Hanna answered, and Ragan stepped inside.

The fire had been allowed to die out, and without light the only sign of life in the dugout was the heavy smell of tobacco smoke. Out of the obscurity, Kitch Dunsan's voice said, "You got back quick. Didn't it pay off?"

"Plenty," Ragan assured him. Except for the part that lay strictly between himself and Joy, he told them what had happened.

Pace Hanna whistled. "No use in us setting here watching 'em bring the stuff in," he muttered.

"None," Ragan agreed. "You've got some riding to do, Pace. See every rancher you can between now and daylight. Have 'em meet here the first thing tomorrow. Meanwhile, Kitch is going to Canyon City after the sheriff."

"Me?" Kitch howled. "Man, we couldn't get back till the fun was over!"

"We need us a sheriff," Ragan retorted.

"Chance," Pace drawled, "you ain't forgot Squint Lister, have you? There'll be a big ruckus if we take the ranchers into that hole. You'd best wait and see who's left to tell about Squint before you bring in the sheriff."

"I killed Lister in self-defense," Ragan said. "I don't want it to be anything I've got to keep hidden. I made up my mind to that coming back tonight."

"What'll you be up to while Pace and I're busy?" Kitch asked. "Seems to me you've had all the fun so far tonight."

"I only want to make sure it happens the way we figure it's going to," Ragan said. "Now you two get going."

The others got their horses and left at once. Now Ragan was grateful that he had refrained from divulging to his enemies that others, besides himself, suspected the meat company of rustling activity. That had emboldened the rustlers to go ahead with tonight's work. It had kept Ragan's confederates free of danger, so far, which was why he had sent them on their missions. But he realized that it had multiplied the danger to himself. Joy would probably try to get word to Judd and Terrebine how her rendezvous had turned out. Once she did, Ragan would be a doubly hunted man, a man who would be shot down on sight.

At present there was nothing to do but wait and listen to the drumming of the rain. Ragan wanted coffee to refresh himself and help him keep awake, but he dared not risk the sparks a fire in the stove would send up into the drenched blackness of the night. So he rolled cigarettes patiently in the darkness and smoked them and waited for time to pass.

He would be unable to hear what he wanted to from here because of the storm. Presently, when he estimated that the time was drawing near, he rose and donned his slicker and pulled on his damp hat. He was confident that the cattle would come up along the bed of Squabble Creek, strung out and pushed along not only by Younts' crew but by the Teeter's.

Ragan decided against taking his horse,

for he would have the bother of keeping it quiet for a long while. He left the dugout on foot, keeping to the brush running out from the spring and making his way to the creek. There, at a wide point in the loose-soiled bed, he settled himself in the wet foliage to wait again.

HE GREW drowsy and finally gave way to the half-slumber that permits instant awakening, the uneasy somnolence in which a puncher sleeps in the saddle while riding herd at night. It seemed no time at all when abruptly every fibre of his being was drawn to a razor-sharp keenness. In spite of the storm racket, he recognized the sound—the low, heavy, and unmistakable sound of moving cattle.

He had beat them, he had won, and within minutes he was watching the first bawling, half-trotting cattle move past him along the creek. The size of the gather amazed him, though Joy had warned it was to be big. The point riders passed on beyond Ragan, and it seemed a great while before flankers followed. When the drive had completely passed him, Ragan estimated that there were five hundred head of steers in the herd. Free beef, sufficient to run the Terrebine Meat Company for two or three months, and sufficient to break some of its unpaid owners.

Ragan kept his place for some time after the drive had passed him. At least Joy had not managed to carry a warning and call off the operation. Now, warned or not, the rustlers would play hob putting that beef back on its rightful graze. They had committed themselves irrevocably; they had to go ahead.

For fear the dugout would be investigated, Ragan stayed away from the place. There wasn't much more he could do until he had a force of ranchers to take against the rustler crew. The deflation and boredom that is always excitement's aftermath began to have their way with him. He let himself doze again, wet and miserable, and suddenly too spent to move.

He awakened with a realization that dawn was washing away the night. But the rain went on as if the vapor that had created it was beyond exhausting. The big flat showed its usual complement of Ladder and Spade steers. So the rustlers had shoved them back, refraining carefully from drawing any of them into the moving bunch.

Ragan knew that by now he was a hunted man, that every man involved in last night's raid who was not required to stay with the cattle would be after him. It was a gamble whether he brushed with one of these before he could join up with the ranchers Pace Hanna was to gather. Ragan debated returning to the dugout for breakfast, and decided he would be as safe there as anywhere.

But first he took a look along the creek. As he had predicted would be the case, he found that rain and the creek water had washed out all sign of the cattle that had been moved in the night. But he knew from experince that, farther down the creek, there would be sign that would be weathered confusingly, but which still would look suspicious. The big thing would be what could now be discovered in the mountain hole.

Returning to the dugout, Ragan made a quick breakfast. He decided not to risk the long job of riding out among the cattle that were under his own care, but watered the horse he was keeping up and tossed it some more wild hay.

Finally his wary attention showed him a rider coming up from below.

## CHAPTER XVI

### *Decoy*

CHANCE RAGAN did not reholster his gun until he had identified Nancy Hanna. She was riding hard when she whipped in to the line camp and swung off her horse. Their quarrel, the anger that had been in her when they had last parted, was gone from her now.

"You're all right," she said, on an immense sigh.

Ragan laughed. "I picked the easy end

of it, I reckon. What brought you, Nancy?"

"Dad sent me. He's having trouble raising help. It's hard to tell when stock's missing off a winter range. They're trying to check up before they'll believe Dad and go on the warpath with you."

"Don't blame 'em, I reckon," Ragan said, but he felt a quick and keen disappointment.

The situation might not keep long enough for every plundered stockman to persuade himself that he had been preyed upon. Ragan cursed to himself, impatience rising in him. Canyon City was sixty miles distant, and even if Kitch Dunsan found the sheriff at once they could not be back here before another day.

But, seeing the worry on Nancy's face, Ragan said, "Had your breakfast yet, kid?"

"Chance Ragan," Nancy said fiercely, "if you call me a kid once more I'll skin you out of your hide! So help me, I will!"

Ragan laughed. "Honey," he drawled, "I just pretend to myself you're too young for me so I can keep my hands off of you."

"I hate a pretender," Nancy said flatly.

Ragan gave her a quick stare, aware suddenly that she had been making a play for his interest ever since he had returned to the John Day. He hadn't seen it because of his obsession with Joy Kildane, and with what he had believed to be a great personal disaster to himself.

"What about Kitch?" Ragan said pointedly.

"Kitch is in love with a girl called Dixie," Nancy said promptly. "I've followed that romance step by step. I've advised and counseled Kitch in the ways of winning a woman. There's where you could stand a few lessons, Chance Ragan."

"I got one," Ragan said. "You were right about me. I was looking out the wrong door for my shadow. And I apologize for what I said, that day."

Nancy's eyes were shining, but at that moment Ragan straightened, listening intently. He wasn't sure, but it seemed to him that he had caught the sound of hoofs through the low grind of the storm.

Quickly he added, "I might have visitors that would be bad for you. Get aboard your horse and cut up into the timber till we see what this is."

"I can take anything you can!"

"Get going!"

Nancy obeyed him, swinging onto her horse and putting it down past the barn so she could swing up into the pines. Ragan couldn't see horses and right now could hear nothing. His nerves playing tricks, maybe, he decided. Then something broke out of the draw that had led him to the rustlers' hole—three horsemen riding hard. Within the minute Ragan had identified Angel Younts and a couple of Younts' riders.

Ragan stepped back into the soddy and pulled his gun, glad that he had sent Nancy off. They would give him trouble, he realized, unless he got the drop on them and kept it until somehow he had stood them off. But they rode boldly to the dugout and did not seem surprised when Ragan stepped out through the doorway behind a leveled gun.

"Sit quiet, boys," Ragan drawled. "Those're three saddles I wouldn't mind emptying."

Younts looked drawn and tired, and his eyes were full of truculence. "Hear you got real independent last night, Ragan," he bawled. "Hear you kicked plumb over the traces. You forgot about Squint Lister?"

"Maybe," Ragan said. "What about him?"

"He's mighty apt to get dug up. Unless you want to come home with me and the boys."

"For what?" Ragan asked. "To get myself beefed?"

YOUNTS laughed. "To my mind, Ragan, you ain't in a bargaining position. Last night was big and the wind-up, and we're taking no chances with you. Joy Kildane's took off our muzzles. She says we can tear into you and welcome. Ragan, from what I understand about that, you're a plain damned fool."

"Ain't we all?" Ragan intoned. "But

not so big a fool as you, Angel. Last night somebody offered to sell Terrebine out short if I said the word. They'd do the same with you. Did, in fact. I was told definitely it was you who shot my horse last winter. And I'm going to kill you for it, Angel. Right soon."

"You want to swing for killing Squint Lister?" Younts demanded.

Ragan shook his head.

"Then you better come down off your high horse and make a deal with us," Younts said. "We're ready to deal. We admit you hold big enough cards to rate a cut in things. Come over to the Fork and see Arch and Judd and make a dicker."

Ragan grinned. "Tell Arch I had a more attractive offer last night and turned it down. Tell him that. It was me who turned it down."

Younts bawled, "Damn you, Ragan, I ain't bluffing about Squint!"

"Why don't you go ahead and prove you're not, Angel?" Ragan's lips still smiled, but his eyes were cold. "Now, get out of here. You're stinking the place up."

Younts swung up his head, then turned his horse and rode out, his punchers following. Ragan, if anything, was glad they had come. It proved that they still figured Chance Ragan was playing a lone hand, out of desire for revenge against those who had wronged him.

Nancy waited for a long while before she came down from the woods. "I saw who it was," she reported. "And I could hardly draw my breath."

"You get home now, Nancy," Ragan told her, turned serious again. "They still figure I'm the only one bucking their little game, and that's still our ace in the hole. If Pace manages to organize a war party today, tell him to hold it at your place instead of bringing it here. I'll get down there sometime before night."

"Chance, you be careful," Nancy warned.

He laughed and watched her ride away.

Before he went down to the Ladder, Ragan wanted another look at the rustlers' hole, and he was thinking of the second time he had visited the place, approaching through the hogbacks east of there. When Nancy had disappeared from the flat, Ragan went to the barn and saddled the roan.

Once more he rode the full length of the flat, to its east end, then turned south along the shallow ravine. He was following the sign left by his own horse, sign that was eroded now, rendered ageless by the rainstorm. Again the sharp, bracing fragrance of the pines reached his nostrils. He rode slowly, keeping a close watch all about. After an hour he was in the tangle of the hogbacks again, heading westward, then finally he was on the high rim from which, once before, he had inspected the mountain-locked flat.

There were steers there now, scattered across the flat and grazing on its untouched grass. Ragan could see no riders but knew that Younts had this herd under heavy guard. In case of trouble they would, if warned, attempt to run the stuff out of here. That had made it imperative for Ragan to know what kind of country lay beyond this flat, deeper in the wasteland.

After his look from the rim, Ragan pulled back out of sight and rode on southward again. He was tight-nerved, wary, fully cognizant of the fact that he was the only outsider who could bring a party in here without much time lost in ferreting the place out. That doubled the price on Ragan's scalp, for he knew that his enemies would put no more reliance upon their bluff about Squint Lister. The next time they sought Chance Ragan, it would be to kill him.

TWO HOURS of prospecting in the country south of the rustlers' hole told Ragan there was nothing in that direction that would help Younts to conceal a herd the size of the one he had on his hands. Ragan turned back, a plan well-shaped in his mind. If the stolen herd was jumped from the north end of the flat, it would be penned in.

The vital thing was to get Terrebine, Kildane and Younts up here to be surprised with it. And Ragan knew the one

thing that would draw in all three—pursuit of himself. He had to make arrangements with Pace Hanna, then serve as a live decoy at the risk of his own life.

Ragan swung wide of the flat, returning to Squabble Creek, wanting to run no more risks than necessary. And now, realizing that a return to the line camp might be to ride into an ambush, Ragan crossed the east end of Squabble Flat and pressed on into the pines beyond, aiming to circle the camp then make his way on down to the Ladder.

Though it led him through unfamiliar country, he had no difficulty in making his way through the timber. In late afternoon he came out on Ladder range. Then presently he was descending upon the ranch headquarters he had not visited since the day he had quarreled so bitterly with Nancy. While they had munched cinnamon rolls. Hunger stabbed at Ragan with the memory, and he hoped she had been baking again.

He could see from the lack of horses about the place that there had been no gathering here yet. Ragan meant to change horses, so he rode down to put the roan in the corral. Nancy, having seen him, came running across the yard by the time he reached the pole gate.

"Dad isn't back yet, Chance!" she called. "I'm wondering if something's happened to him!"

"What would?" Ragan asked, noting the concern in her eyes.

"Nothing, probably," Nancy admitted.

"Forget it," Ragan said, "and feed me. I'm plumb starved."

"All right," she said, and turned back toward the house, relieved by his easy manner.

When he had watered and unsaddled the roan, Ragan went up to the house. As he came into the warm kitchen he was delighted to see that Nancy indeed had baked recently. There was a loaf of fresh-baked bread on the table, a dish of butter, and coffee was heating on the stove.

"I've been a damned fool," Ragan thought. "But she pleases more than a man's stomach."

## CHAPTER XVII

### *Race Through the Night*

PACE HANNA rode in through the twilight. He had obtained even less sleep than had Ragan and showed the effects in his wet, bewhiskered face and fatigue-dulled eyes.

"I've been called everything," he reported, warming himself by the kitchen fire. "A fool, a slanderer, and a plain lunatic. I don't know what good I done. But it was too late to call 'em together for tonight. So I told 'em to be at the Spade a couple of hours before daylight, tomorrow. Kitch might be back with the sheriff by then. But I don't know how many others'll show up there to help."

Ragan was disappointed, but not greatly surprised. The only way a range herd could be fully accounted for was through a roundup and careful count. That happened no more than twice a year unless for some big and special reason, such as the sale of a ranch or herd. Otherwise a man had his book count, which he adjusted up and down as known happenings required. Rustling could go on over a long period without being detected unless it was actually seen or unless stock known to be in a particular vicinity thinned out notably or disappeared entirely.

The ranchers Pace had seen that day had been caught in a completely complacent frame of mind. What they had been told had been a shock, a claim beyond grasping without proof. But right now cow ponies and punchers would be scouring the range, checking up. Ragan felt confident that many a man would be convinced enough to be on hand at the Spade before daylight. However it developed, he himself had to go ahead.

In a somber voice, he said, "Then you take over that part, Pace. Try to keep it bridled. All you want is proof of what's been going on, them steers returned where they belong, and maybe collections from the meat company for what's already been rustled and butchered."

"And what do *you* want, Chance?" Nancy asked doubtfully.

"The same thing. Plus."

"It's the plus that worries me," Nancy said.

Ragan rose, saying, "I'll try to have Terrebine and Kildane up there, so badly mixed up in it they can't wiggle out. If you come in from the north and west, Pace, there's no way they can run them cattle to hide 'em. All you got to do is tack 'em down there till the sheriff gets here to see for himself. So I'll figure on you being somewhere on the northwest end of that flat at daylight."

"I'll be there," Pace promised. "Even if it's by myself."

"In which case," Nancy vowed, "I'll be with him."

Ragan left, knowing that he was going to be on his own through the showdown, that he had his own ax to grind and would be handicapped by the need to consider Pace and Pace's neighbors. But change was coming swiftly to Ragan now, a buoyancy that resulted from the casting off of old and useless burdens. The burden of Joy Kildane. The burden of bitterness over his year's ordeal. The elation born of this new freedom was healing him. From here on, if he lived at all, he would mend fast.

Ragan rode south from Hanna's Ladder, not sure of his first objective. He faced the problem of getting Terrebine, Kildane and Younts together, then of somehow getting them up to the rustlers' hole. He could no longer assume that they did not know the whole country was being roused against them. Some rancher, some puncher—disbelieving—could have gone to them already with the story of what Pace Hanna was claiming and trying to organize. If that happened, or yet did, it was hard telling what the next hours would bring.

The rain had slacked a little, the overcast thinning so that the light was a little better than it had been the night before. But a wet saddle on a wet night was never comfortable, and Ragan rode in miserable fortitude, his mind busy. Kildane, he reasoned, would have pulled out his crew and returned to the Teeter, its use served now that the gather and drive had been made. But Terrebine would likely hang around until he knew how fortune was going to treat him, and he would be either at Younts' Fork or at the Teeter with Judd and Joy. It was a gamble which place he would be.

CONSIDERING how to get the three men together, then draw them on into the mountain hideout before daylight, Ragan began to see a possibility. He was passing in behind Kitch Dunsan's Spade now, and the Teeter was just ahead. Ragan decided to pay another visit to see whom he could flush there. Night-adjusted at last, he lifted his horse to a faster gait.

It was still early enough for the lights of the Teeter ranchhouse to show whether it was occupied, and a little later Ragan saw light in both ranchhouse and bunkhouse. He rode in boldly but with a dry throat because there would not be a soul on the ranch who would welcome him warmly. His arrival in the wet ranchyard excited no attention from the bunkhouse. Ragan, with a sour smile on his lips, climbed the steps of the big house and knocked on the door.

Joy came to the door, and for a moment she only stared at Ragan with surprised and hostile eyes.

"Where's Judd?" Ragan asked in an impersonal voice.

"What's that to you?" Joy said harshly.

Ragan grinned at her. "It might be a good idea if I saw him, Joy. Judd or Terrebine."

"Do you know what they'll do to you if you come close enough?"

"I know what they'd try," Ragan admitted.

"I'd like to see if you've got the nerve!" Joy blazed. "They're over at Younts' place."

"Terrebine, too?" Ragan asked with interest.

"All of them."

"Thanks," Ragan drawled. "I been practicing up on my rassling, and maybe—" But she had slammed the door on him.

Ragan knew that she could have lied to get him to go to Younts' headquarters so that he would fall into the man's clutches. Or Judd could be here in the house, and even Terrebine, laying low, to emerge on the quiet and take Chance Ragan. Yet that was hardly likely, for few women in a range country answered the door at night if there was a man in the house. Ragan had a feeling that Joy was alone, that Judd, at least, actually was over at the Fork. That was a long ride, and Ragan mounted and started out again.

He rode carefully, fearing that Joy might have sent riders after him. When no indication of that developed, he was again assured that his men were where she claimed. Now he began to consider how he would work it at the Fork. A bold but promising plan would be to move in there by stealth, getting the drop on his men, then departing in confidence that he would be chased. Ragan decided to try it.

He came to the place where the fateful dry wash emptied out into Wildcat Creek. The wash ran water now, a flat but steady stream, and its benighted outlines reminded Ragan of his flight along its bottom after he had killed Squint Lister.

Ragan pressed on, in against the high hills, drawing close to the Fork headquarters. He was alert in every fibre, and it was this that saved him, presently, when he noticed a sudden alerting of his horse.

Reining in, he sat for a moment, listening intently. Horsemen were coming toward him at a fast clip, due ahead. From the Fork. Ragan studied for an instant, then swung his horse about. The closest cover, at this point, was a brush clump standing at a considerable distance to the west.

Ragan wanted a look at the party before he went on to the Fork. So he retraced his course for a distance, moving quietly. He came to a boulder nest where the wash joined the creek. Moving in among the big rocks, he swung down. He stood at his horse's head, its muzzle pressed by his palm to keep it silent.

THE CLATTER of thudding hoofs grew louder in the night. In a moment the party broke past Ragan, strung out and riding fast. Ragan could have thrown any one of the horses or roped a rider from the saddle. He was interested and baffled, for Angel Younts was leading the hard-riding party. Behind him came Arch Terrebine, then Judd Kildane, with two of Younts' punchers following. Dark as it was, Ragan was so close to them as they streaked past that he was positive of his identification.

Something had moved them fast and in force. Regan stood there, still silencing his horse, waiting for them to get on. It didn't surprise him that the onrushing party turned up the wash that led to the rustlers' hole. Presently he swung into his own saddle and rode out, turning into the wash, still hearing the splashing rush of horses in the water ahead of him. Ragan felt emboldened enough to hurry so as to keep within earshot of them.

He encountered no difficulty for what seemed a distance of two miles. They were coming to the fork where the wash met the ravine that led out to Squabble Flat, through which the stolen cattle had been brought into the hole. It grew quieter ahead, forcing Ragan to slow down and move with careful attention to every rod of ground he covered.

Ahead, the hill on the left fell back a trifle. It was the chip of a flat where the useful ravine came in from Squabble Creek. And then Ragan stopped his horse, staring and puzzled.

A rope barred his way, a double length of it stretching across the wash. Now the sound of travel ahead had resumed its full volume. They had halted to string this rope, then gone on. Ragan pulled over to the side and swung down on the dry bank. The rope had been strung up hastily, from a cottonwood on this side to a brush clump across, then run back to form a double strand, three or four catch-ropes tied together.

For a moment Ragan supposed that this was to make sure that none of the stolen cattle strayed down where it wasn't wanted. Yet the sudden hard ride in the night suggested more than that. There had been the danger of the rustlers' getting wind of

the suspicion against them. This unexpected alarm indicated that they had.

Ragan couldn't figure it all but knew that rope was often strung up this way to spook driven cattle—and even wild horses—along a chosen course. If so, they meant to drive the stolen cattle back onto Squabble Flat. In all probability they had been tipped off and were trying either to disclaim evidence or to make the rustling look like the work of Chance Ragan.

Puzzled though he was, Ragan knew what he would do. It was the work of minutes to loosen the rope. But the brushless draw offered no such quick and convenient way of stringing it up again. Ragan didn't try to scare up something to serve as anchor posts. With the wash thrown open again, he sat his horse squarely in the center of the draw and waited.

The night was quiet, except for the fall of the rain and the periodic moaning of the gusty wind. Held motionless, discomfort grew in Ragan, and fatigue settled in his shoulders. But he had a strong feeling that presently he would discern cattle coming down along the wash upon him. He meant to make them stay in the wash and give them a shove if he could manage it.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### *Mountain Manhunt*

THE WAIT seemed interminable. Ragan's horse swung its head and shifted its feet. Then, finally, both Ragan and the horse were listening. It was the sound of cattle, lifted off the bedding ground and being pushed. Ragan recognized it but still did not let his horse move out of its tracks.

Then at last he saw the point of the new drive just above him. There were no riders because the banks guided the herd once the cattle had been rounded in and funneled into the wash. All five men who had come up here so hurriedly would be needed to accomplish that. So Ragan held still. The lead steers, as they came abreast, only gave him a mild stare and kept on in the wash. They were strung out in a file of no more than two or three and at a loose distance apart.

Ragan began to calculate the time left to him. Riders would be along in the drag. When they came close enough to realize that something was wrong they would be violently dangerous riders. Ragan kept a rough tally of the cattle moving past him. When the bulk of them had plodded on down the wash, he lifted his gun. He fired three fast shots, terrifying eruptions that echoed from bank to bank.

He jumped his horse at the line, yelling at the top of his voice. The shallow water of the draw impeded the cattle, probably would prevent a full-scale stampede. But nothing was going to stop them now, either, and Ragan had his own life to think about. He swung his horse and sent it pounding along the draw toward Squabble Flat.

He had heard excited yelling, but it was at a considerable distance behind. It couldn't be much past midnight, and would be hours before there could be anybody in here to lend him help. But also nothing on earth could keep the stolen herd from spilling out onto the Fork's back graze and onto the Teeter. The cattle couldn't be rounded up on a night like this, nor in a couple of stretches of daylight, either. The stolen cows were on the hands of Kildane and Younts, no matter what their wishes were in the matter.

The pursuit that clung to Ragan confirmed his opinion that they would waste no time on the cattle. The disruption occurring where it had would lead their suspicions unerringly to Chance Ragan. Now he began to consider how to play the hare to their hounds and stay alive until daylight. He knew what they would still try to do about the rustled cattle. Every effort would be made to switch the true situation, to call him the rustler with themselves the disrupters of the effort.

Ragan's horse had come a long piece already, and this was a worry. As he rode, he replaced the empties in his gun. Once

before he had been headed off and captured and he didn't mean to let that happen again. Weighing his plight with all the detachment he could muster, Ragan decided against wasting his horse, himself and his chances in sheer flight. The darkness helped him, and there was only the racket of his plunging horse to keep the pursuers informed of his whereabouts.

Spilling onto Squabble Flat, Ragan swung west toward the line camp. Let them follow, thinking he was preparing to make a stand there. That was what he wanted. He let his horse cut in against the creek and the brush. Presently he reined in abruptly and swung the animal in among the cottonwoods and their underskirt of thicker growth. Dismounting, he waited again at his horse's head.

He could hear the pursuit, and it was coming his way. He grew interested in its volume for he suspected there were no more than two or three horses bearing down upon him. In all probability the force of suggestion would carry them on toward the line camp. This switch in positions, Ragan hoped, would give him the chance to make a jump of his own.

They cut past him, but too far out to be identified, just two riders flogging their horses. They went on, thundering down upon the dugout at the west end of the flat. Ragan waited through long moments to make certain no one else was coming along behind. The night grew quiet again as the hoof-beats receded into the distance. Remounting Ragan went on, his mouth ruled in a flat line.

PURSUING now, his quarry was lost ahead of him. The fact that there were only two of them puzzled Ragan, worrying him with the fear that Terrebine and Kildane had lined out simply to get off the scene before they found themselves in serious trouble. Younts and his men could be left to try to salvage the situation, but Ragan remembered that Younts had had two of his men with him, so these two could be no more than small fry in the game. This uncertainty kept Ragan from regaining any feeling of confidence.

But he felt certain that the two ahead were going to investigate the line camp. He considered ways and means of having it out with the two here and now. He kept to the west side of the flat, planning to come in upon the camp from the bench behind. He held his horse down so that the racket it made wouldn't carry far. Presently he swung across the creek and cut in to the west-end bench.

He had no way of telling whether the two others had ridden in on the dugout or had left their mounts to approach it cautiously. Whichever it was, he wanted to be up on the bench behind the place to deliver a surprise. Gunfire might possibly draw others, but Ragan felt a hot offensive to be his best chance.

Climbing to the bench, he pressed in a distance from the lip, then moved to his right, circling to get in above the dugout. It was here that he had once captured Squint Lister, and again the ground swells kept him from seeing far ahead. At last he moved in over the low rise—and stood transfixed.

A man shaped up ahead of him and a voice bawled, "Stand right still, Ragan! I've got you covered!"

He didn't recognize the voice, and he didn't understand how one of the two he had followed could have got up here without coming the same way he did. He had seen no horse in the area from which he had started up. Yet from this position the man had heard and perhaps glimpsed him.

Ragan still held his gun but couldn't use it without being dropped in his tracks. Then the man lifted his voice and yelled in high glee, "Angel! I got the cuss!"

Ragan fought a wild impulse to have it out. From the way this man had called, Younts was on the level below.

"Drop your gun, Ragan!" the man ordered. "It's the wettest damned wait I ever made but it paid off. Been here since dark last night, hoping to pot you when you come in. Drop the gun, damn you! I want to go down and get warm."

Ragan let his gun fall. The man told him to move back, then came forward and picked the gun up. He ordered Ragan to

retrace his steps down from the bench. Descended, they rounded the springs and came to the dugout. Two men were in sight there, and one of them, Ragan recognized at the close distance was Angel Younts.

"Damned nice work, Stub," Younts commented. "Didn't I tell you he'd try to out-sligger us and get too smart for his own good? Ragan, I had a notion you'd fall back and try to jump us. You didn't know what I knew, that Stub was all set for you on the rim."

"Let's get indoors," Stub growled. "I'm half-drowned."

Beaten for the moment, Ragan let himself be shoved indoors. Younts thumbed a match and lighted the lamp, elated, confident. The third man moved at once to the stove and began to kindle a fire. They all pulled off their drenched slickers and hats, so Ragan did also, and was not stopped.

YOUNTS dried his hands on the sides of his shirt, then began to roll a cigarette. His hairless head, his blank, cold eyes, made him look wierdly sinister. He drawled, "Well, Chance, you made us lose a pot, but that's all. There was a poor damned fool refused to believe what Pace Hanna's been telling. He come to Judd. So we knew we had to get rid of them steers pronto and we knew how to do it."

"But did you?" Ragan murmured.

Younts licked his cigarette and lighted it. At the stove a man was helping himself, setting out to make coffee. There was no mistaking that they considered their night's work finished.

"It don't matter," Younts said, "that you managed to run that herd down below. We know the sheriff's coming out, and that maybe there'll be a dozen hombres up here madder than hornets come daylight. It would have been better if that rustled stuff had been found here on your flat. But it makes no real difference. Know why?"

"You haven't confided in me lately, Angel," Ragan drawled.

"Got any idea where Squint Lister's buried?" Younts asked. Without waiting for the obvious answer, he said, "Well, he's right up there behind this dugout of yours. We done that one time when you were gone. He caught you rustling, Ragan. You been at it ever since you moved up here, holding the stuff back in the hole. You beefed Squint and buried him here, and just you try to get out of that. It don't make no difference what Hanna and Dunsan say. Nobody believes 'em hardly, anyhow."

"I'll have my say," Ragan remonstrated.

Younts shook his head. "Huh-uh, Chance. The slickest damn' tongue in the world never made talk after it was dead. You been rustling, Chance. Nobody would give you a job when you come back, so you got sore and turned rustler. Me and the boys got suspicious after Squint showed up missing. We got onto the cattle you been hiding in the hole. We planned to jump you. But you got scared and run the stuff down on us. Yet we had it out, and you got killed in the squabble. Squint's body, up there behind your camp, will nail that down tight."

Ragan managed somehow to keep a look of indifference, of ease on his face. Though Younts' smooth recovery and cover-up for the night's hiatus struck fear in him. It wasn't of immediate importance whether Younts could make his wild yarn stick; he probably could. But Ragan wasn't supposed to be alive to find out. He probably wasn't going to leave this dugout again alive.

He had to bluff, and in an easy voice he said, "You're all wrong, Angel. But you won't go up for rustling. I'm going to kill you for what you did to me last winter."

"He's going to kill me, boys," Younts said, and laughed.

They seemed to be in no hurry, but daylight was still hours away. There was hardly a chance that Pace Hanna would come up before then, or that he would bother to visit the dugout when he did come. Ragan's chances were mighty slim.

"Let me tell you something," Younts said, as an amused afterthought. "Even if you did down me, Judd and Arch'll claim

what I just told you. We worked it out together at my place tonight. Still cheerful as you look, Chance?"

"Why not?" Ragan asked. "And since that's my coffee the man's cooking, supposing I share it with you."

"Give the man some coffee, Stew," Younts told the puncher at the stove. "And the rest of us."

Ragan drank coffee with his unwelcome company, and he smoked a cigarette. Striving for some way to buttress the look of confidence he was showing them, he drawled, "There's one thing I'd advise, Angel. Before you crawl out on a limb by beefing me, be damned sure Squint's carcass is still up there where you put it. I've been scared of that body and admit it. And your yarn wouldn't sound half as good if you find you can't produce it. No body—no killer charge. And your rustling yarn's weakened."

## CHAPTER XIX

*Superstition, an Ally*

YOUNTS had come forward in his chair, his eyes narrowing. "You moved it?" he growled. "Ragan, that's so plain a sandy you ought to be ashamed."

"Want to kill a man without knowing for sure, Angel?" Ragan intoned.

Younts looked at a puncher. "Go see, Stub."

"Dig with my hands?" Stub complained.

"On your nose. Make damned sure Squint's still where we planted him."

Stub hunted up Ragan's lantern and lighted it, grumpy, and plainly jumpy by the assignment. He got into his raincoat and fiddled with his hat at the door.

"In case you find Squint walking around in his bones out there," Ragan drawled, "just yell for help."

"Damn you!" Stub breathed.

The malicious cruelty in Younts was heating up. He grinned at Ragan's dig and said, "Go with him, Stew. Stub's scared."

"Hell with you!" Stub bawled, and wheeled out the door.

"You better go along at that, Stew," Younts said. "Let a heifer snort out there, and Stub'll be over in the Crooked country. We might need him." When Stew looked quizzical, Younts added, "I can handle Ragan."

"He's fixing to bust out on you," Stew warned.

"Then he's fixing to cash in his chips."

"Who is?" Ragan asked.

He was seated on his bunk now, and he watched Stew leave showing the same distaste Stub had revealed. Younts had taken one of the chairs and was between Ragan and the door. He wore his gun on his left side for a cross-draw, and his hand was on his lap, within inches of the gun's grips. He grinned as he noticed Ragan's interest. Younts was at ease, for within minutes his men would be back to confirm that Ragan had bluffed about moving Squint Lister's body. A man like Younts couldn't be beaten by force, and Ragan knew it.

Younts knew it also, and Ragan yearned to upset that complacency in the most rattling way possible. Though Younts had been entertained by his men's superstition, Ragan knew the man was not devoid of it himself. Nine times out of ten the vicious were cringing cowards about the supernatural, as the two punchers had shown, the result of guilt in them, the instinct that warns a man of punishment for his misdeeds.

Flinging a sudden, startled look at the window, Ragan gasped, "Holy Moses, Angel!" and crossed himself hastily.

Younts came further forward in his chair, his eyes riveting on the night-masked window pane, his mouth hanging open. In that breath of time Ragan sailed off the edge of the bunk. His hand had for long moments been closing on the hard, straw-stuffed pillow on the bunk. He swung it as he moved, hurling it at Younts. The man ducked instinctively and lost the chance to pull his gun. Then Ragan was on him, driving man and chair over backward.

Ragan's first effort was to clamp a hand over Younts' mouth to prevent an outcry, while his other hand caught the man's gun-hand in a tight and powerful grip.

"A long while ago!" he whispered in a panting breath, "I warned you I'd kill you with my bare hands! So long, Angel! This is for last winter in the blizzard!" He shut off Younts' mouth and nose with his shoving palm, Younts' head and body pressed beneath him, shoved heavily against the floor.

Younts threshed in mighty wrenches, but Ragan held him. There was no mercy in Ragan, for once more he had been warned of his imminent death and was fighting to live. Younts used his free hand trying to break Ragan's grip. He gouged Ragan's face and clawed at his eyes. At intervals he managed to free his face and drag in gagging breaths, with never enough excess air to yell. Each time Ragan stifled him again, and Younts' wrenching grew weaker. Then at last Younts went limp.

He rose with Younts' gun in his hand. The man still lived, and began to breathe again in gasping spasms. Ragan couldn't kill him, and in that instant found another freedom. But Younts was highly dangerous to him even yet, and so Ragan bent and whipped the gun-barrel across Younts' head. Then he lifted the man, put him on the bunk and covered him with a blanket.

HE REALIZED presently that he had had plenty of time. Stub and Stew had hunted around for a shovel, then gone up the slope and dug. Ragan, resting from the exertion of his tussle with Younts, waited through another ten minutes. Then he saw the lantern swinging across the rain-swept ranchyard and crossed over to a place beside the door.

He fell behind the door as it swung inward. He heard Stub's startled exclamation at seeing the empty room. As the door closed, he had his gun covering both men.

"Was I bluffing, boys?" he asked.

"About Squint!" Stew breathed. "But not about Angel, I reckon. Where is the son?"

"That's him making the lump in the bed. Boys, we're going to get horses. You'll strap Angel in his saddle, then we're all going down to the Spade. By now there'd ought to be quite a gathering there at Kitch Dunsan's."

He forced them through the motions, and within fifteen minutes they were riding.

Horses stood in numbers in the Spade ranchyard. A lantern had been hung on the end of the hitch-rack, its pale light faintly illuminating the area. The big house was lighted, and as Ragan rode in with his prisoners he could see the shapes of men outlined against the windows. Angel Younts had revived, and because of the man's steady cursing, Ragan had left him strapped to his saddle. The two punchers, cowed by Ragan's gun, had offered no resistance on the long ride down from Squabble Creek.

Their arrival attracted no special attention for new arrivals had been coming in for some time. Ragan herded his charges to the edge of the big porch and yelled. The door opened and a man looked out in startled wonder at the figures the door's sudden light fell upon.

"Hey, Pace!" Ragan yelled again.

The porch filled with men as Ragan swung down. Then Ragan pulled up his shoulders, staring at Arch Terrebine, who came through the door. Judd Kildane was behind him.

In a discouraged voice, Pace said, "Chance, they've all but got you hanged. You should have heard the yarn they've been telling."

"He'll hear it," Terrebine put in. But there was shock on the man's face as he stared at Younts and Younts' two men. Kildane showed the same wary curiosity.

"Sheriff get here?" Ragan asked.

"Not yet," Pace answered. "But Terrebine fogged in with Kildane and they just about put their windy over. Where'd you get Angel and his choir boys?"

"At my shack," Ragan said. "They set out to beef me, but it slipped."

"He's lying," Younts cut in. His manner had changed at sight of his two confed-

erates. He looked hopeful, excited. "The son jumped us on the trail. Had a gun on us before we knew it. And give us a wild yarn about meaning to pin his dirty work on us since his rustling blew up on him."

"Bring 'em in the house," Pace said. "I reckon we'll have to wait for the sheriff."

When Ragan stepped into the big living room he was instantly aware of his hostile reception. But he thought of that only for a brief instant before he pulled up in surprise. Nancy Hanna was there, but her presence astounded him less than did that of Joy Kildane, who sat quietly in a corner, looking at him with a stony disinterest.

"A regular party," Ragan murmured.

"And maybe a hang party!" a man snapped at Ragan. "We been rustled, all right. We know it now. And we know who done it!"

"Me?" Ragan asked him.

"Who else?" the man snapped, and Ragan saw from his eyes that he was truly convinced of it.

"He's a killer on top of that!" Angel Younts bawled. "Squint Lister's body's buried up behind his dugout. My boys found it there tonight."

NANCY HANNA spoke up then. Her eyes were on Joy Kildane. She said, "I think this has got Chance a little puzzled, Joy. Suppose you repeat what you told us about him."

"Why not?" Joy asked, with a toss of her head. "He tried to get me to run away with him. He said he was going to have plenty of money. And everybody knows he came back to this country stone broke. I even heard he had to sleep in the corral in Cottonwood one night."

Ragan blew out his cheeks. He could only stare at the girl, dumbfounded. Yet she met his eyes in bleak defiance. Ragan understood now that Judd and Terrebine, after the stolen cattle had been run into the lower country, had bent their efforts toward covering their own tracks. Knowing that the ranchers were to assemble at the Spade, they had come here, taking the initiative. And the hostile faces all about Ragan warned that they had put it over. Joy's casual, intimate lie had probably cinched it.

As if reading Ragan's mind, Nancy said, "Women being of a finer, higher nature than men, Chance, she couldn't possible be lying. So what have you got to say about it, you hound?"

Nancy's irony was not lost on those who listened. Ragan felt a warm wave of gratitude toward her. Tomboy though she was, she was liked as only a cute chit of a decent, warm-hearted girl can be liked in the cattle country. She had the respect of every man in the room, excepting probably the guilty ones. If nothing else, the hatred in Joy's eyes as she looked at Nancy should have changed some minds.

Ragan fell in with Nancy's tack. "Joy's a little mixed up," he drawled. "What I told her was that she'd have to live on steaks since all I had to my name was a big stolen herd I didn't have a chance in the world getting rid of. Where's a man going to sell bootleg beef in this country with Terrebine owning all the outlets? You could fly steers to the Wyoming market as easy as you could drive 'em over that long trail without being caught."

"That's right," a man muttered. "Where *would* he get rid of 'em?"

## CHAPTER XX

### *Death in the Dawn*

ARCH TERREBINE gave a sour grin.

"I ain't been saying much, Chance being an old pardner of mine. But he tried to make a shady deal with me. That's what tipped us off to him."

"And you turned it down!" Nancy breathed. "Arch, you're wonderful! Is that what you boys fought over so terribly?"

Terrebine scowled at her. "That's it. And that's how it rides. Me, I'm going home and let the sheriff tend to it. Coming, Joy—and Judd?"

"Now, just a minute," a man said. "Looks

like we better all cool off and take another look at this caper. Ragan was out of the meat company, but he had a job and was drawing regular wages. Man'd have to work his head off to rustle all them steers alone, yet Ragan's run his regular job, too, Pace says, and he's done all kinds of work at the line camp, to boot. Where'd he get time to rustle, even if he did know where to turn it into cash? Why, damn you, Terrebine, you and friends of yours are the only ones in this country who could get rid of rustled beef easy!"

Terrebine pulled up his shoulders, and his expression turned wooden. "Is that an insinuation, George?" he spat.

"That's a fair question!" the man answered hotly. "Ain't you? And you got the set-up for it. You ain't paid us a cent more than you had to, and you've charged your customers twice what you should have! Maybe you're right. It's a job for the sheriff. And he'll want more than your word and Kildane's and Younts's!"

"There is more!" Terrebine rasped. "You heard Younts say Ragan killed Squint Lister and they know where he hid the body!" He eyed Ragan. "You denying you killed him?"

Ragan shook his head. "No. I did. To save my own life after I found out how you were working the rustling. Squint jumped me and got the drop and threatened to kill me where I stood. He was lining a carbine on me when I shot him. But I didn't bury him. Younts did that. Up behind my dugout. Then you tried to blackmail me into letting rustled stock leak across Squabble Flat. You know that, Arch. I'm just telling the others."

Terrebine sneered and said, "Tell the sheriff. I'm going home."

A man blocked his way, saying, "Not till the sheriff says you can, Arch."

"Get out of my way!" Terrebine growled.

There was a stirring all through the room. Terrebine halted to look about and he saw puzzlement and uncertainty where, before Ragan's arrival, he had seen belief. He had been the Triangle's market, a good, handy market bringing income the year around. The Triangle had been reluctant to see fault in him. But now Terrebine understood how close he was to the edge of deep, serious trouble. Not a man in the room meant to let him leave until he had been cleared by the law.

Nancy's voice was casual, but sounded loud in the room's sudden quiet. "Too bad Kitch isn't here, Arch. He knows a girl in Susanville who's listened in on some of your confidential talks with Judd in the Nugget there. Doubtless she'll testify that there's been no secret understanding between you and Judd. Nor profits split or any other despicable things like that."

"What's that?" Terrebine asked sharply.

Judd Kildane straightened his body, and even Joy looked astonished.

"Why don't you wait and ask Kitch what all this girl told him?" Nancy invited sweetly.

"Is that a fact?" a man asked Nancy.

"Ask the sheriff what he thinks when he gets here," Nancy replied. "Kitch knew the law would be as hard to convince of the meat company's crookedness and that Kildane was in cahoots with it as you knothead ranchers have been. So Kitch intended to take the girl in to see the sheriff. If the sheriff comes, it means he's been persuaded."

AT THAT point Ragan saw how to goad Terrebine into displaying himself badly. "But maybe your books'll clear you, Arch," he murmured. "If the sheriff don't seize 'em before you've doctored them to show you've bought as many steers as you've sold in your butcher shops."

Terrebine shot a trapped and helpless look at Kildane. Angel Younts cursed. Then wildness came into Terrebine's eyes. Ragan knew he was bent on protecting those books, which he had never expected to have to display. Terrebine stabbed a hand for his gun and brought it up. He said nothing but began to sidle toward the door. Kildane half lifted a hand in protest, as if he feared he was being deserted. He let the hand fall, saying nothing. Terrebine went out the door, pulling it closed behind him.

"My!" Nancy said to Joy. "What on earth got into him?"

But Ragan was moving, sliding out toward the kitchen of the big house. As he came onto the porch he heard a horse clatter out of the ranchyard in a driven run. Ragan knew that now every man behind him was persuaded of the true nature of the rustling. He realized that Terrebine knew himself to be suspected strongly, that a little detection work on the part of the sheriff would convict him. Terrebine was bent now on destroying evidence he feared, or else on sheer flight.

Ragan reached his horse and swung into saddle. He had goaded Terrebine into flight to make the man convict himself, which automatically incriminated the others. Though Terrebine wasn't thinking of his confederates now, but only of his own safety. Maybe if he could destroy his books, he would still try to bluff it out. Or perhaps he would panic still more and decide to get out of the country. Ragan didn't mean for the man to have a chance at either alternative. He put his horse into pursuit.

Nobody emerged from the house to follow and offer help, and Ragan knew that Pace Hanna was holding them back. Pace understood that this last thing belonged mainly to Chance Ragan, who had spent a year in hell as a result of Terrebine's schemes. In the far forward distance Terrebine's horse kept pounding, and the rider was expecting pursuit.

The darkness was paling out a little. Daylight would help in what was to come. Ragan didn't even know where Terrebine kept his main office now, but at best it meant a long ride for the man. Neither Terrebine's, nor Ragan's horse could keep up this gait for many miles. But Ragan meant to require it of Terrebine, to run his horse down and settle it. His own mount was as fresh as Terrebine's, a good animal. Ragan asked its best of it.

Terrebine was sticking to the road that led eventually to Susanville, too rushed and too desperate for evasive action. Twice, as it grew lighter, Ragan glimpsed the man, not over a quarter of a mile ahead. The two horses settled down at that distance apart, the lead animal not able to increase it, Ragan's mount unable to cut it down.

But in the relentless pursuit, Ragan was gaining. Terrebine's horse wouldn't last long enough to get him anywhere. Sooner or later the man would have to turn and fight.

They crossed the Spade's huge feeding flat then thundered up the long length of a shallow draw. For a time Terrebine was clearly visible, due ahead, but beyond the reach of a pistol shot. Ragan's horse was showing wear but was a valiant animal, seeming to sense the importance of its stamina to its rider. Ragan hated to treat it so, but there was no alternative.

When they tipped down into the long valley beyond the hills, Ragan grew wary. He could tell from the condition of his own mount that Terrebine was being forced to plan his fight. Now Ragan slowed frequently to listen to the thud of hoofs ahead before he thundered on. Once he caught a reassuring glimpse of Terrebine, still riding hard, far ahead. "Gaining distance," Ragan thought with a swift plummeting of hope. Then, for a time, Terrebine was lost to him.

RAGAN saw his man on the brow of the next hill, at a moment that saved him from riding headlong into an ambush. The horse had slowed to a balky nearwalk, and Terrebine was flogging it savagely with the ends of his reins. Then Terrebine halted the animal and swung it for a searching look back. He saw Ragan, and by then it was too late to lay in waiting.

Ragan let his own horse slow to a fast trot. Terrebine had turned his animal clear about, was sitting his saddle in resigned patience, waiting. Maybe he knew who had come after him, or perhaps he knew only that he had to make a fight before it was determined whether or not he could go on. Ragan, the gap steadily closing, saw the man lift his gun into his hand. "The end of a partnership," Ragan thought bleakly and plucked his own .45.

Slowly Terrebine swung his horse side-

ward in the road, broadening the target it presented, narrowing that made by his own body. Seeking every advantage, cutting down the odds. Ragan came on at him, headlong. Terrebine lifted his pistol high, waiting again for the range to come right for him. Precise, deadly, a cornered man whose will drove him on.

When he saw the quick, chopping motion start in Terrebine's arm, Ragan swept up his own gun, some instinct, some thought of the peace of his soul requiring of him that he allow the edge where Terrebine had sought it. He saw the searching, vicious flame of a gun muzzle, heard the shot's sharp report and squeezed trigger. His horse hadn't slowed. Terrebine sat perfectly still. And both shots missed.

Terrebine, in a stab of frenzy, shot again, his twisted face plainly visible to Ragan who quartered his horse as he cocked his gun and shot once more himself. Abruptly Terrebine clutched his saddle-horn. His mouth opened in a drawn-out gasp. His gun tipped down, then all at once he fell from the saddle.

Ragan slumped then, the strain sending a dizzy black wave across his mind. Terrebine's exhausted horse circled away from the fallen rider, lathered and heaving and too tired to move farther off. Ragan's mind cleared, and he slid drunkenly from saddle. Walking over to Terrebine, he saw at a glance that the man was dead, the hole of the bullet just above his left eye. Ragan sat down then in the center of the road. Neither horse was in shape to go any farther.

Time had lost its meaning when Ragan got to his feet again. He had been roused by the sound of travel, and now he looked south to see two riders coming toward him from the direction of Susanville. He stood there until he was certain it was Kitch Dunsan, arriving at last with the sheriff after Kitch's long ride to Canyon City. Ragan waited for them in bone-aching inertia.

The sheriff was a tall, grizzled man with a fierce mustache and gentleness deep in his eyes.

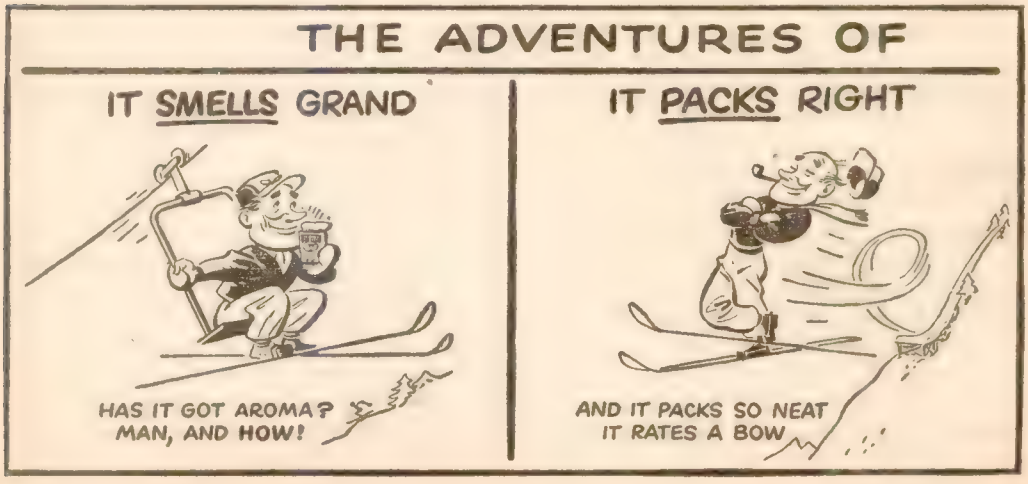
He showed less surprise than did Kitch as the two reined in.

"All over, huh?" Kitch breathed. "And it looks like he drug this piece of it a long ways before he'd accept it."

"He got it anyhow," Ragan said tiredly.

The sheriff didn't question him then. He suggested that Kitch wait with Terrebine and the beat-out horses, letting Ragan use his fresher mount. Then Ragan went back to the Spade with the lawman. . . .

It seemed hours to Ragan before he was free to rest, to think. He was grateful when Pace Hanna suggested that he go over to the Ladder with him and Nancy. They were all anxious to get away. Nobody had been surprised at seeing Joy and Judd



Kildane placed under arrest, least of all Ragan. But the sheriff had accepted Ragan's account of Squint Lister's death, in view of the other evidence against the lot of them. He told Ragan to go somewhere and rest until the law had further need of him.

AT THE Ladder Ragan slept the clock around in the spare bedroom. When he roused in a pleasant noon, he found there was nobody home but himself and Nancy.

He emerged from his room sleepy-eyed but restored.

"Just in time for dinner," Nancy said.

"Figured so," Ragan admitted.

There were only two places at the table. Nancy said that Pace was off helping the ranchers round up the cattle Ragan had scattered. They sat down together, when Ragan had washed up and combed his hair. But it wasn't food he was hungry for.

He studied Nancy a moment, then smiled, the meal gone from his mind.

"You wrote me two letters while I was in the hospital," he said. "The only girl who did. I never answered your letters. And I come back eating my heart out for Joy Kildane. I ought to be kicked."

"That's right," Nancy agreed in good cheer.

"It was fine the way you pitched in for me the other night," Ragan resumed. "I'm grateful for that. Everybody else but Pace was ready to see me hang. But it was more than you helping me out of it. I'm glad I saw you and Joy together. Honey, you made that girl look like a gold camp tramp."

"Certainly," Nancy said. "But I wish you'd stop hemming and hawing, Chance. Let's get the incidentals behind. Certainly I'm going to marry you. Certainly I love you, and I've done it longer than you have me. All that's undecided now is what will you do and where will we live."

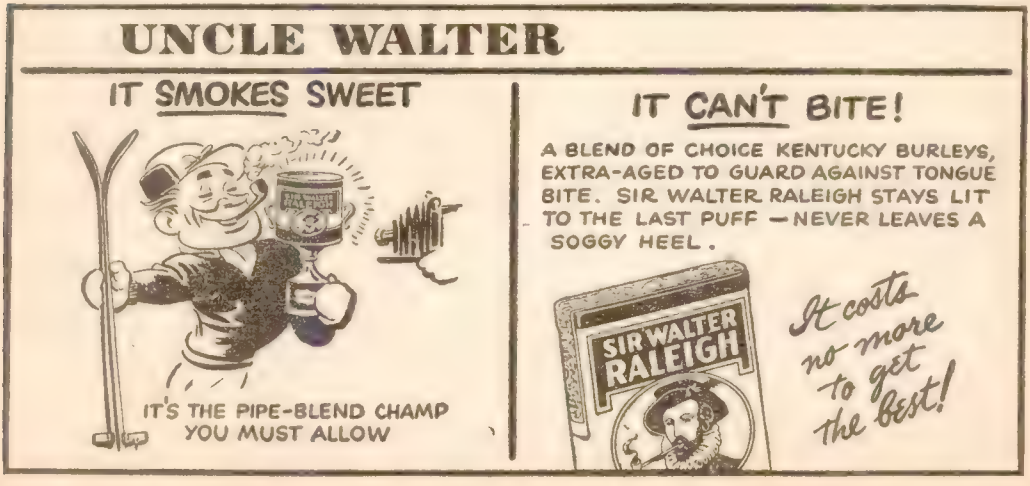
"The dugout," Ragan said.

"You probably could take over the meat company now and get rich."

"Not me," Ragan said, shaking his head. "I want no bonanza. Let the independent butchers run the shops again. Let them do their own buying. Me, I want a cattle ranch, or a start."

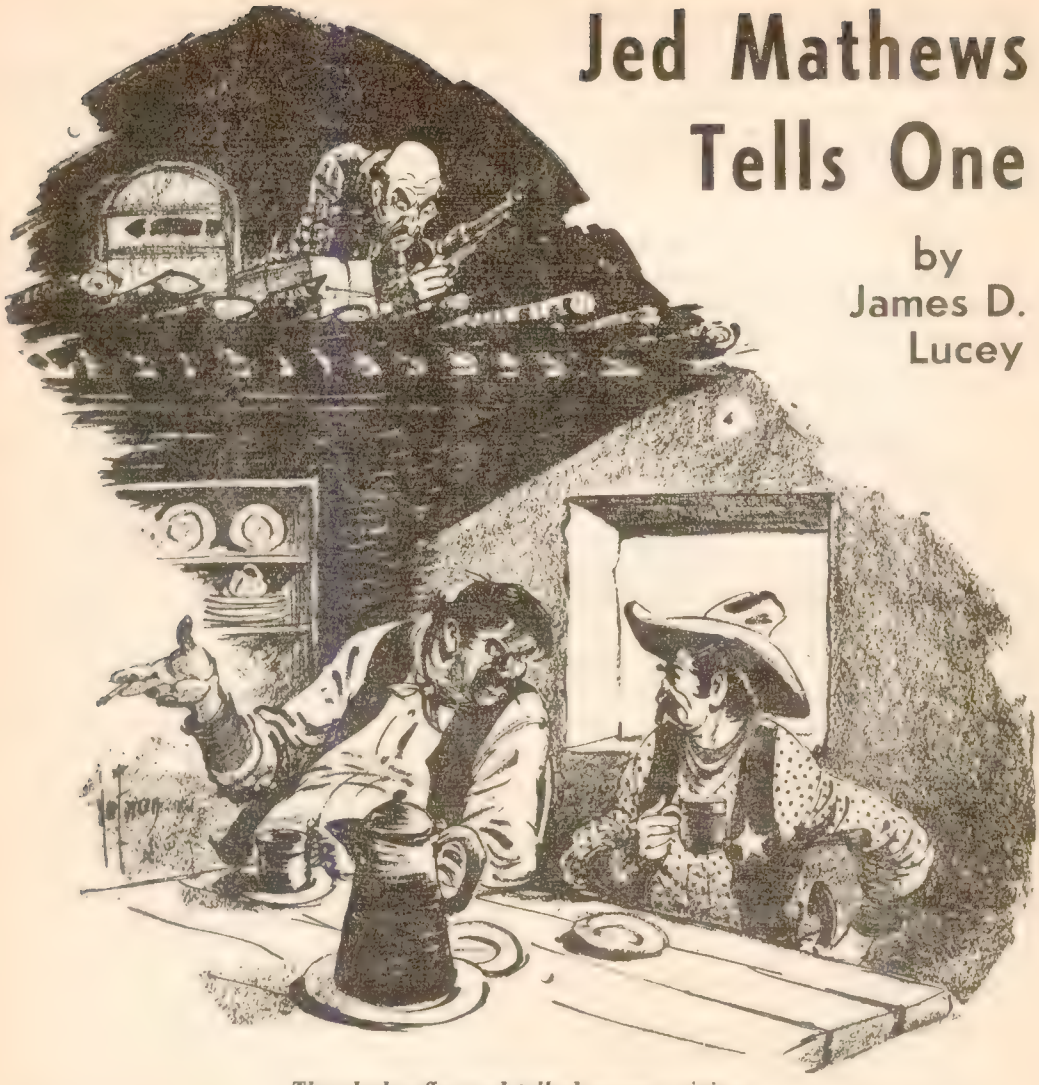
"You'll have one," Nancy said. "And until you get lined out, we'll live in the dug-out . . . Chance, you'll tip over the table!"

But Ragan got to his feet without that. Even so, Nancy nearly beat him up. The flippancy with which she had tried to hide her feelings went all to pieces then. Tears sprang into her eyes, but they were happy tears. Ragan knew that. He found the knowledge in the warmth of her straining kiss. • • •

# Jed Mathews Tells One

by James D. Lucey



*They had coffee and talked copper mining*

WELLL, yeah, sure I've known horse thieves. The hills around here used to have more thieves than they had horses. Before John Slaughter become sheriff, anyhow. You just pull up a chair here and buy me a drink and I'll tell you about that.

What did you say you do? You'll have to yell; getting old, I am. You *write*? You mean like the boys that works on the *Epitaph*? Oh, a *book* writer! Well, I'll be damned and fried in b'ar grease!

I ain't much for books. Ask me, you'd do better—

Well, sure I'll tell you about horse thieves! What did you think I was getting primed for, anyhow?

Crowding a man ain't polite.

*Poor hoss thief Buzzard Head . . . he had to go and get honest!*

No, there weren't many *perfessional* horse thieves. What there was finished up mighty quick. I guess John Slaughter being sheriff of Cochise County is how come we didn't have a real crop of perfessionals. Little fellow, Slaughter was, weren't more than half my size, but size didn't count none because them was the days of equalizers. And, friend, he *equalized*. Take horse thieves: Slaughter always brought back the horse. Just somehow never could remember to bring back the thief, though.

Buzzard Head Jacobson and Frank Bayless was the two horse thieves I knowed best. Bayless didn't steal horses unless he had to. But Buzzard Head, he was a genuine smoke-tanned, hand-wove perfessional horse mover.

Now, you take that time Frank Bayless had what passed for a ranch down there across the Line in Old Mexico—him bein' a temperary Mex citizen right then. He was doing fine, till mighty unexpected, Buzzard Head stops by one day for a visit and Bayless don't have time to hide Big Red—which was a roan stallion of his. Best doggone horse in the Territory, it was, and no error.

OF COURSE, there weren't no real harm in Buzzard Head. He was as nice and not so bright a fella as you ever seen—even though that face an' them hunched shoulders did make him look like a escaped vulture from a Mexican *puebla's* sanitary system. But when it come to horses—well, the Buzzard's perfessional ethics was apt to prevail, that's all.

Buzzard Head says, "Howdy," an' unsaddles that old pinto of his, and curies it, and turns it into the corral with Big Red, and then he's ready for Bayless to hide him out in the loft of that 'dobe-and-log thing Bayless called home.

Most of the afternoon, Frank is sitting on the step a-whittlin' a wooden chain and worryin' himself about Big Red, and pretty soon along comes Bob Cushing, who was a Arizona Ranger.

"Light and have some," Bayless tells him, polite—as if he wanted him around.

Well, they have coffee and talk copper mining, and the drought, and women, and have more coffee and talk horses, which brings to mind Buzzard Head Jacobson. Cushing says he ain't seen him around lately. Bayless allows he ain't neither. "Mexican horses ain't good enough to bring him this fur south."

"Maybeso," Cushing says. "That red stallion of yours, though . . . Still, the Buzzard ain't ever gone out of his way to steal a horse. Not more than three-four hundred miles."

The coffee finally give out and Cushing rid off. First thing Buzzard Head said, when he dropped down from that loft, was: "Frank, that man's a-ruinin' my reputation. Why, I ain't *never* gone four hundred miles for a horse. Not out of my way, I ain't."

Bayless nodded real solemn. "Those Rangers just don't appreciate you, Buzzard."

"Yeah. They're pretty dumb, ain't they?"

"No-o-o. It's just they can't see that bein' able to think like a horse is a talent. A mighty rarified talent, Buzzard."

The old Buzzard just grinned all over. "Is that what I got, Frank? A talent, huh? Say, and you know, thinking like a horse ain't easy. Them is real smart animals, Frank." So the rest of the day, Bayless listened to how smart they is.

That night the Buzzard goes to sleep sort of early, in order to digest proper the frijoles and tequila Frank fed him on. When he's snoring pretty, Frank climbs on Big Red and rides him down to the creek, hiding him careful in the cottonwood motte down there. Next morning, the Buzzard does the chores, and then he stretches his pinto out for the Border.

Bayless gives him a good start, then rambles down to the motte to get Big Red. Funny thing. Big Red ain't there no more.

Well, Bayless prospected around for sign nigh on a week. Don't find none. Finally, he decides he's going to have to

cross that Border after all. He goes to Bisbee and meanders along Brewery Gulch, staying out on the street where the light won't get on his face, and pretty soon he hears some men a-talkin' about a fine blond-maned roan stallion what John Slaughter done bought the other day.

Bayless knows Slaughter must have bought that horse fair and square, and that he'll have a bill of salé from somebody reputable to prove it. So, seeing he didn't dare talk it over with Mr. Slaughter, there was only one thing to do. But trouble was, when he got out to Slaughter's ranch he saw Big Red staked out right there in front of the porch. An' Slaughter sitting right there on the porch smoking a cigar.

Figurin' to wait Slaughter out, Bayless goes down to the creek. But when Slaughter finally goes in the house, a couple punchers take Big Red away. And lock him in the barn. Then they mount guard on the barn.

Frank Bayless is plumb disgusted. But he gets to thinking. If he can't get Big Red back, he can at least pay himself for the trouble of his trip. So when a leaves, a bunch of brood mares that was pasturing on the other side of that creek, they leave with him.

As I guess you reckon when Sheriff Slaughter found them mares gone, the first thing he did was check the loads in his six-gun and go prowling for a fella named Buzzard Head. He run him down in Bisbee—at the Dutchman's down to the end of the Gulch.

Buzzard Head blinks down at the sheriff and sort of crawls all up into himself. Sheriff John Slaughter don't ask questions, just says, "Shouldn't have stole my mares last night, Buzzard Head."

"Huh? Honest, Mr. Slaughter, I ain't done nothing. I been right here in the Dutchman's all night. And all today. Honest!"

Slaughter cocked his head forward and squinted up at him in that way he allus had, and his blue eyes drilled right through the poor old Buzzard. "Better prove that."

Rynning walked in just then—that was Tom Rynning, Captain of the Rangers—and I don't know, maybe it was lucky for the Buzzard that he did. Anyhow, he said, "That's right, John. He was passed out in front of the door. I had to step over him a couple of times myself."

The sheriff thought a minute, said, "Tom, pin a badge on him."

"You crazy?"

"I want him made a ranger. Temporary."

JOHN SLAUGHTER was always a man of few words, so it took Rynning a time to figure it. But what it worked out to was this: Slaughter had bigger snakes to skin right then and his mares had to come secondary to his public duty. Which meant he couldn't go trackin'. But if anyone could track them mares, and steal 'em back, it was Buzzard Head Jacobson. And since Slaughter figured the thief was most likely a Mexican, he wanted the stealing back to look legal. Which it would, if Buzzard Head was a ranger. And if he was caught, no *alcalde* down there would dare string him up.

See, Rynning's Rangers had a friendly agreement with Kosterlitsky's *Cordado*, the *Cordado* being sort of a ranger outfit, and besides that, a army and a judge, jury, and executioner all rolled up into one. Of course, the governments didn't know nothing about this agreement, but the way the outfits worked it, Rangers could chase American outlaws across the Border and haul 'em back to the States, and laws saying they couldn't do such things just somehow got forgotten. Same thing with the *Cordados*, they could follow Mexicans up here.

So they swore Buzzard Head Jacobson into the Rangers and pinned a badge on him and bought him a drink. Then Sheriff John Slaughter looks right into him and he says slow and mighty quiet: "Buzzard Head, bring those mares back, or I'm going to kill you."

I guess you reckon Buzzard Head said he'd bring 'em back.

Well, he found 'em all right. No trouble to that. They was grazin' peaceful as you please just below Bayless's rancheria. Buzzard Head planted himself down under skyline and waited for night, then he ambled down into that valley and held a private roundup session.

Out of a mesquite clump, a voice said to him: "Buzzard Head, I sure do hate having to kill you."

"Gosh, Frank, you'd get in trouble doing that. They made me a ranger, Frank."

"I reckon."

"Sure, they did! I got the badge right here. See?"

"I see it all right. Buzzard, tell me something. Don't you know better than to shoot a ranger?"

"Huh?" Buzzard Head studies on that one a minute, then yells: "Hey, I didn't kill nobody for it! Rynning pinned this badge on me himself. I'm a ranger, Frank. . . . Sure wish I weren't, though."

"How come?"

"Well, if I weren't, then I wouldn't have to—"

"Naw. How come they swore *you* in?"

But the Buzzard hadn't quite figured that one out hisself. Finally, Bayless holsters his six. Far as he could see, Buzzard Head *had* to be telling the truth. The old Buzzard's thinker was too puny to handle such a whopper of a lie.

"Now this here mare," Bayless says, patting a gray's neck, "you found her carcass where a catamount jumped her."

"I did?"

"That's right. And these two, they was killed for dinner by some Apaches. And this one got lamed by a rattler bite and was left behind to die of thirst—a mighty doggone mean dirty trick, Buzzard Head."

"Yeah, Slaughter would come and kill you for sure for that."

"*Mmm,* reckon. Tell you, then; this one busted a leg and got shot. Now this here one, you found her carcass near a loco weed patch, so you figure that's why she was shot."

The Buzzard scratched his jaw a while, said, "That catamount you can have, and the loco weed. But I just don't know as he'll believe them others."

"Don't think so? Why not?"

"Gosh darn it, Frank, I just ain't liar enough for all them mares!"

BAYLESS hauls out his pistol and sort of shakes his head over what he's got to do. Now, Buzzard Head ain't *too* dumb. So it ends up both of 'em is looking at the muzzle of the other's Colt.

They put the Colts away.

"Doggone it, Buzzard Head, it was you who made me steal them mares in the first place."

The Buzzard's hand is sort of edging back to that Colt again.

Frank comments: "Reckon you know Colonel Kosterlitsky's a friend of mine."

The Buzzard's hand drifts back onto the saddle horn.

"Look here, Buzzard Head: you're a honest to gosh, all-fired Arizona Territory Ranger. How'd you like to be the *only* Ranger that's also a *Cordado?*"

"Well . . . might as well . . . Hey! No you don't, Frank! Nossir, I ain't going to be no *Cordado!*"

"Wouldn't like that?"

"Nope, sure wouldn't, Frank."

"Took my time, last time I drew my six. And at that, you didn't no more than match my draw, Buzzard Head."

"Doggone it, I don't want to be a *Cordado!*"

"Well, there just ain't no other way for me to play it. We'll just go see the Colonel and get you sworn in, and then you can go get my stallion for me, and when you bring it back, why, you can have the mares, Buzzard Head."

Buzzard Head looks powerful mournful. "Frank," he says, "how come all this happened to me? I ain't never done nothing but steal horses. Seems like all of a sudden everyone's after my hide. It ain't fair, Frank. It just ain't."

Frank agrees, showin' him how sorry he feels about it himself. But like he points out, there's nothing else for him to do.

They meet Kosterlitsky in Fronteras next morning. The Colonel leans out the window of his big black coach and swears

the Buzzard in. And afterwards, Bayless says, "Buzzard, if you *don't* bring me my stallion, I'm going to kill you." And just as he says it, some of those Mexicans in the green hats shoot off their guns and a big fella what was digging a pit out there falls in to his pit.

"Horse thief," the Colonel says.

Buzzard Head looks sort of green and climbs awful slow onto his horse and rides awful sudden out of there. So now he was a Ranger an' he was a *Cordado,* and catastrophe had come into his life to stay.

Well, week and a half went by and Big Red ain't been brought back to Bayless yet. Bayless had just about decided to go hunting a buzzard when a little yellow haired man stops by. What Slaughter asked casual was: Had Mr. Bayless seen Mr. Buzzard Head Jacobson?

Bayless allows he ain't, but has a powerful hankering for buzzard meat in his diet.

Slaughter says, "Come along."

"How far?"

"Border."

Now, that country down there was like the backside of beyond—all coulees and rock and saged-over hills and more rock. They had to ride that country three days before they come on tracks. Slaughter said one set of prints was made by his black mare. Bayless hunkers over another set and says they're Big Red's. Up to now he ain't spoke of why he's after Buzzard Head, but he allows now is maybe a better time than later.

Sheriff Slaughter studies Big Red's tracks, then he studies Bayless—like as if what he's looking at is a new kind of lobo.

His finger taps a hoofprint: "That's the roan Buzzard Head stole from me."

THEN Bayless gets awful busy stuffin' Climax into his pipe. "The way I figure, he stole it from me. Then someone sold it to you. So I got Buzzard Head made a *Cordado.*"

Naturally Slaughter comes up roaring and reaching. But Frank Bayless still don't look up. "It was my stallion, wasn't it?" And he shows Slaughter his bill of sale, and after a while Slaughter puts the pistol away. They follow tracks. Slaughter is looking powerful sour, and once he says, "Next thing I hear, the Buzzard'll be a U. S. Marshal."

Come along sundown, the tracks turn up a dry riverbed. They rode a long time and then there's a light up ahead. It's near onto night, and they can just make out—a hunkerin' over that fire—Mr. Buzzard Head Jacobson. And behind him is Big Red, a-croppin' grass. It's a long way up to there, and they ain't half-started when, sudden, the wind shifts; and Big Red's head comes up, like he's smelled them coming.

Then they can't see Big Red no more, because Buzzard Head has kicked out the fire.

Buzzard Head lights out up-river on Big Red. Bayless lets loose a whoop and goes after him, and coming right along behind Bayless is Slaughter. Somewhere out in front of them two, the mares is a-stretching it to catch up with Buzzard Head.

It's a near thing to a stampede.

Right soon, Buzzard Head swings out onto the desert, where the ground's harder and the going is faster. The whole caboodle swings out onto the desert behind him. There ain't nothing but stars and the ragged end of dusk to see by, but there ain't nothing to throw a shadow neither, so Buzzard Head, with his long frame scrooched low in the saddle, stands out plain as hair in the butter.

Slaughter's ridin' next to Bayless now, and he's got his pistol pointin' straight ahead.

"Slaughter," Frank yells, "I'll kill you if you hit that horse!"

"Someone's got to shoot!" Slaughter shouts back.

So Bayless drags his old Henry out of the scabbard. Slaughter was right, for there warn't no way to catch up to Big Red.

Now, when it come to snap-shooting

a rifle, there warn't no better man than Frank Bayless was. So Buzzard Head was gone beaver, and no error.

"Just don't hit them mares!"

Well, snap-shootin' from a gallup, that ain't so bad. But having your life depend on yuh *didn't* hit somethin', that's calculated to make a man a sight edgy. Bayless said his Henry had lost its bead; and seeing it ain't sense to shoot a gun that's got no bead, naturally he put it back in its boot.

Of course, they didn't quit; they give the Buzzard a good run, you got to allow that. But rich men'd gone bust backing hosses to beat Big Red. And them mares —well, there weren't finer mares in the Territory—an' I guess you reckon what them mares had on their minds.

Last Bayless saw of it, John Slaughter was still a-going it, but there weren't no more than the smell of the Buzzard's dust for him to go by.

You know, the Buzzard hadn't never been anything but a plain horse thief—never made much money, but he never needed much because he warn't burdened with worries. And then that Frank Bayless and John Slaughter come along—scared him half to death with them badges, saddled him with all them horses and robbed him of his freedom. Ain't no wonder to me that he let his perfessional ethics prevail and made tracks for California or some place. They had crowded that fella something terrible.

Now, I ain't sayin' Buzzard Head *wanted* a horse ranch. But if you have horses, you got to feed 'em. Pretty soon nature takes its course. And what have you got? A horse ranch.

Which I figure is how come such mighty fine roan horses with blond manes and tails comes from California.

Yep, never crowd a man, I always say. And if you do, watch out he don't think like a horse.

What did you say? How did *I* hear about it! Well, gawdone all bone-brained book writers anyhow! Who in 'tarnal hell did you think stole Slaughter's mares from him that first time? . . . Books!

I ain't much for books. Ask me you'd do better. . . . • • •

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# NO GUNS in RED FORK

## CHAPTER I

### *Death Threat*

THE irritation brought on by the impending election had been digging at Tom Reed for a number of weeks now. It flared into open anger as he read the letter. He stood there in the weed-grown vacant lot behind the courthouse and tipped the letter toward the dropping sun and read it again, cursing soundlessly.

The letter was from the warden of the state penitentiary. It said that a certain prisoner numbered so and so and so and so, by name Malcomb Jiles, convicted five years ago of grand larceny from Red Fork County, was scheduled to be released next week upon termination of his lawful sentence.

Jiles, the letter said, was coming out of prison on the prod. The warden's eyes and ears within the prison walls had informed him of this, had even supplied him with the name of the man against whom Malcomb Jiles had sworn vengeance. The letter mentioned that name. It concluded with the warning that Sheriff Tom Reed could expect an attempt at murder very soon.

Tom Reed grinned bitterly and handed the letter over to his deputy, Joe Eckstein. Eckstein and Reed had been shooting at tin cans in the vacant lot.

"More trouble with Ed Blankenship, Joe. Worse than that damned election. Somebody's aiming to kill him, now."

He picked up another tin can while Joe Eckstein read the letter. He threw the can into the air and shot three times savagely. Each shot sent the tin can kicking a little higher than the last. Tom Reed did not drop into a crouch when he shot. He tried no evasive action whatsoever. He simply stood there with his gun aimed squarely at the target and squeezed off the trigger.

*A Novelet by* **CLARK GRAY**

*Sheriff Tom Reed's diplomacy, aided by his fists, kept the peace in Red Fork—until Malcomb Jiles showed up with filled hands*

REED was a big man of twenty nine with the first touches of gray lightening his dark hair at the temples. He had on worn blue levis and a gray wool shirt. His badge was inside the pocket of the shirt. He wore no holster; he had been holding the gun in his hand when Joe Eckstein's boy brought the letter from the post office and he kept on holding it now as Joe Eckstein folded the piece of paper with a sigh.

"That warden knows his business, Tom."

"Yes," Tom Reed said. He rubbed absently at a nick in the polished pearl handle of his gun. There was a hint of strain around his gray eyes. "Joe, are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

Joe Eckstein nodded soberly. Eckstein was a wizened little man given to loud shirts and louder profanity. He had been a deputy sheriff since before Tom Reed was born. "I been around politics a long time, Tom. I never saw a break like this one—if you play it right."

"If I forget," Tom Reed said, "that I am sheriff of this county." He looked at his watch. It was after five; his daily gun-practise session was officially ended now. He unloaded the gun and dropped the shells into his pocket. "Let's go inside, Joe. This'll take some talk."

He moved up the back steps of the courthouse and down the musty smelling hall, past the county attorney's office and the court clerk's office and the judge's private chambers. Most of the doors were closed and locked now. In his own office he hung the gun in its holster on the wall peg and dropped the extra bullets into his desk drawer.

Joe Eckstein followed him in and scowled at the gun still swinging in the holster. He lifted it down and sat in his chair beside the brass cuspidor and broke the gun, squinting up the barrel. "You ought to clean this thing oftener."

Tom Reed stood thoughtfully by his desk. "Joe, am I a good sheriff?"

"You always have been." Joe Eckstein replaced the gun and peered sharply at Tom Reed. "Let's figure this logical." Joe held up a brown gnarled fist and looked at the fist as if he expected an idea to come from it. He unfolded one finger from his fist.

"By the numbers, now. First place, you got a tough election coming up. And Ed Blankenship is your opponent." Joe Eckstein scowled at his fist and peeled off another finger.

"Second place, this Jiles boy is coming out of the pen. And as sure as God made little apples, he's got the idea of killing Ed Blankenship. This same Ed Blankenship who's running against you. Which you and I wouldn't be sorry if he did."

Joe Eckstein paused significantly. His dark eyes were shrewd.

"Third place, you want to be reelected so bad you can taste it. You needn't try to lie to me about that, Tom. And you want to marry Ruth Cornett, but your damnfool pride won't let you ask her till after the election. Right?"

TOM REED put a boot on his swivel chair and swung it around into position and sank into it with a weary sigh. He looked at his deputy gravely. "I'm not denying a thing you say, Joe. But—"

"Shuddup!" Joe Eckstein snapped. "I'm thinking for you, Tom. This is politics, and you're ignorant as a baby there. Now, here's one thing you can do. You can let the kid kill Blankenship. They ain't no dead man going to be elected sheriff."

Tom Reed grinned. "Joe, you—"

"I know, I know. It ain't exactly proper, so you won't do that. But listen to this, Tom." Joe Eckstein leaned forward with his leathery old cheeks sagging. "This Jiles boy is a cattle thief, and no damned good anyhow. Let him take a potshot at Blankenship, then throw down on him and arrest him. And if he tries to put up a fight—" The little deputy spread his hands expressively.

Tom Reed looked at Joe Eckstein with thoughtful eyes. He knew that there was some truth in what Joe was saying. His chance at reelection had never looked poorer. A spectacular arrest, a victorious gunfight could well bring him just the

sort of local notoriety he needed to defeat Ed Blankenship at the polls. Tom Reed knew that his methods of sheriffing were not the kind to attract attention and comment. To his mind a sheriff did his job best when he did it quietly, with as little fanfare as possible. He said now with a smile,

"Joe, I appreciate your ideas. But I am not going to play politics with this Jiles boy. Even a cattle thief deserves a better break than that."

Joe Eckstein's lip curled. "Gentleman Tom Reed," he said, but there was no bitterness in it. "What chapter in your etiquette book you quoting from now?"

Tom Reed grinned and got to his feet. He picked up his hat and looked for a long and thoughtful moment at the gun hanging on the wall peg before turning away without it.

"All right," Joe Eckstein said, disgustedly. "Feed 'em the milk of human kindness, Tom. Jiles and Blankenship will appreciate that. Jiles is a cattle thief, and Blankenship's hired hands are making every ranch in the county, brewing talk about you. Lying about you, damn it. But that don't make no difference to you, does it? Hell, no! You got to think of a couple of crooks before yourself. All right! Go ahead and lose this election."

Tom Reed turned and faced Joe very gravely. His big face was passive. "I guess I'm not much of a politician, Joe. I don't know how to be. But I do know a little about being a good sheriff. Now it seems to me that a good sheriff would warn Blankenship about what was coming. And maybe have a talk with this Jiles boy, too." He sighed. "That's good sheriffing, Joe. It'll have to be enough."

NEXT ISSUE

THE COUNT OF MOUNTY CRISCO

*A "Swap and Whopper" Novelet*

By SYL MacDOWELL

## CHAPTER II

### *Brawl in a Hat Shop*

REED walked slowly up the Main Street of Red Fork, a tall unsmiling man in gray and faded blue. The sun was down behind the false front buildings now, throwing the street in shadow. The shadow made Tom Reed look even more colorless than usual.

Tom Reed knew that he was colorless in more ways than one, but he didn't particularly care. Red Fork itself was colorless, a drab little cowtown with its unpainted frame buildings, a blacksmith shop, a saloon, a general mercantile, Alice Finley's boarding house, a feed store, and Ruth Cornett's ladies' ready-to-wear. But both the town and Tom Reed performed a definite, necessary function in the life of Red Fork County. Neither pretended to be more nor less than exactly what they were.

As he passed the feed store he noted a cardboard poster tacked to the bulletin board on which Len Rawley, the proprietor, announced the daily price of cream and eggs. The cardboard poster bore a large unsmiling picture of Ed Blankenship, black moustaches and all. Tom Reed stopped to read it, feeling his temper rise again.

"A vote for Blankenship," the poster read, "is a vote for courage. Blankenship is not afraid to carry a gun. Blankenship does not pamper criminals. The interests of law-abiding citizens come first, with Blankenship. Red Fork County needs Blankenship for Sheriff."

Without smiling, Tom Reed built a cigarette and read the poster again. It was an obvious attack on him, he thought, no matter how veiled. He felt a deep stir of anger, but at that moment the feed store door opened, and he lit his cigarette with no flicker of emotion on his face.

Len Rawley came out, wearing an apron. He was frowning with worry.

"Tom, I ought to explain this," Rawley

said. "Blankenship wanted to tack that poster up, and I couldn't hardly turn him down. He buys all his feed here."

Tom Reed smiled dryly. "Forget it, Len. It's your store, and you've the right to put up whatever signs you want." He nodded and flipped his burnt match into the gutter and moved on, fighting to subdue his brief flare of anger. After all, he told himself, he had known Blankenship would use every trick in the book to defeat him at the polls. Blankenship was like that, and anger would not change either the man or his methods.

Nevertheless his pulse was still throbbing heavily when he came to Ruth Cornett's ready-to-wear. He hesitated there, sensing an impulse within himself to see Ruth. He recognized the impulse for what it was: a desire to salve his pride. Shrugging, he glanced again at his watch. It was five-thirty. Dinner at Alice Finley's boarding house was not till six. So although this was no part of his job, although it was purely personal gratification, Tom Reed threw away his cigarette and passed into the semi-darkness of Ruth's little shop.

HE DIDN'T discover Ruth immediately. His glance went past the long rows of glass display cases, with their millinery, their samples of dress goods, bustles, combs, hairpins, ladies' underwear, stockings, sewing equipment. Then he heard her voice.

"Please," she was saying. "Please, it's time to close."

Tom Reed swung to his left, and there he saw her. She was standing helplessly before two wide-shouldered young cowhands. The cowhands were inspecting each other gravely. Each of them wore a gaudily feathered lady's hat. They were obviously pretty drunk, Tom Reed thought, but not in a trouble-making way. They were simply enjoying themselves harmlessly. Tom Reed moved forward, smiling.

"Boys, the lady wants to close her shop."

He caught Ruth's quick look of profound relief as he approached, and he grinned at her before giving the cowhands a closer inspection. They were even younger than he had thought, scarcely twenty, he guessed. Decent, clean-cut youngsters, sweating a little from the whisky they had taken. Each of them wore a Colt .45.

"Ain't you boys got chores to do some place?"

The taller of the two looked at the other owlishly.

"Our famous sheriff, Bob. Bow three times to the east."

Tom Reed nodded, still smiling. "And when you get that done, boys, Let's let the lady close her shop."

"I want to try on some stockings," the shorter one said. "I want to see if my legs are pretty."

Tom Reed frowned thoughtfully. In the conduct of his job, he had evolved his own system for handling drunks. Always there was a line, he knew, between good humor and ferocity. If he crossed that line, gunplay resulted. The skill lay in estimating just where the line lay.

"Boys," he said, "I don't think you're behaving exactly right. Come on, now. You don't want me to lock you up overnight, do you?"

It was too far. He sensed that instantly, from the way the tall one scowled as he thought that over. Tom Reed was already moving when the tall cowpuncher made a lurching, drunken pull at his gun.

Tom Reed had absolutely no choice, and he knew it. He had to immobilize both these youngsters before they could shoot. He sent a driving shoulder into the short one, smashing him back against the glass display case filled with women's hats. At the same time he hit the tall one hard on the chin with his left fist and grabbed for the gun and got it by the barrel with his right.

The taller puncher slammed against the wall and closed his eyes and began to slip toward the floor, with the feathered hat falling over his face. Tom Reed whirled and reversed the gun in his hand just in time to see the shorter puncher rising out

of the splintered wreckage of the glass display case, shards of glass and pieces of wood and feathers dropping from him. The shorter puncher's face was contorted with drunken rage now; he was grappling doggedly for his gun.

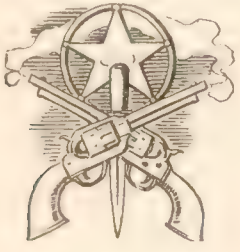
TOM REED lifted the gun in his hand and tapped the shorter puncher very gently behind the ear. The puncher groaned and collapsed.

Footsteps pounded into the shop then as Tom Reed turned, breathing a little heavily. He caught a glimpse of Ruth Cornett's stricken face, saw her lips moving soundlessly, and beyond her Joe Eckstein skidded to a halt with his own six-gun cocked and ready in his gnarled hand.

"They told me in the saloon these boys were over here," Eckstein said.

"Put up your gun, Joe," Tom Reed said.

He turned and took the gun from the shorter puncher, who lay unconscious amidst the litter of hats and broken glass.



He didn't look at Ruth again, but he could sense anger in her.

Quietly he shook the two punchers awake and got them on their feet and held them there while Joe Eckstein, frowning now, slipped handcuffs on them. He walked with them to the door and watched the three move upstreet toward the courthouse, the two punchers shaking their heads painfully, somewhat sobered and a little scared, Joe Eckstein's shoulders stiff with Bantam rooster pride, but solid for all that. Then Tom Reed turned back toward Ruth.

She was on her knees, picking hats out of the smashed display case. Some of the hats had been cut by flying glass, some had been crushed, but she was able to save a few, he saw. She was a tall girl dressed in a dark brown dress that molded the lines of her figure discreetly, but none the less attractively to Tom Reed. Her hair was a rich red-gold. Watching her, Tom Reed felt the familiar thudding inside his chest that told him, as always, that here was the woman he loved.

"Pretty bad, Ruth?" he said.

"Yes." She picked up a crushed hat with a tall red feather and reshaped it with her slender capable fingers. Her voice was muffled, but when she turned to stare at him, her eyes were very direct and a little accusing.

"This needn't have happened, Tom," was her comment. "It's your fault, really."

"Mine!" Tom Reed blinked in amazement. "My fault! How in the devil did you come up with that, Ruth?"

She got to her feet. "If you'd worn a gun—" Her eyes on him seemed suddenly sharp. "Tom, I thought a sheriff was supposed to protect property—not smash it!"

"So it's that," Tom Reed said quietly. "All right, Ruth. I'll pay for the damage."

"It's not the damage, Tom." Ruth sighed and brought a chair from behind the smashed display case and sat in it wearily. Her face was pinched. "But if you'd worn a gun—if you'd held those men at pistol point—there'd have been no fight."

Tom Reed answered her gently, "If I'd pulled a gun on them, Ruth, I'd have had to shoot them. They were drunk." He paused and brought his makings from his shirt pocket and fashioned a smoke, regarding her thoughtfully.

HE LOVED her, but he had not yet asked her to marry him. He hadn't wanted to ask her until after the election, for it was quite possible that he might lose, in which case he would have no job. Ed Blankenship was a powerful man in the county, and Blankenship was putting on a strenuous campaign. But if Tom Reed won, he told himself, then there should be comparatively little opposition for a number of years. In a way, he'd have

an established future to offer Ruth.

He had always believed Ruth understood these things, but now, studying her pinched and worried face, he was not so sure. Ed Blankenship's campaign against him had seemed to fray on her nerves. She was even quoting Blankenship's arguments against him, although he doubted that she realized that.

He lit his cigarette, then smiled at her gravely. "Ruth," he said, "is there something about me that doesn't suit you?"

She flushed, the red color tinting her cheekbones and even her forehead. She waved her slender hand vaguely. "How can I say it, Tom? It's the country. Very few people in Red Fork County respect a law enforcement official who seldom wears a gun, and who uses it only when on a manhunt."

Tom Reed said soberly, "Have I ever failed to bring in my man? Have I ever fallen down on my job?"

"That isn't the point." She bit her lip, obviously disliking the things she was saying, obviously even a little ashamed to say them. "It's hard to express, Tom. But this is a country of men. Hard men."

"And I'm not manly enough to suit you?" His big face was like stone. "I don't get drunk, and I don't carry a gun, and I have never killed anybody. Is that what you mean?"

"No," she said. She looked at him coldly. "You are putting words in my mouth. It's just—that I'm not sure of you, Tom. I'm not sure you are capable of meeting a real crisis. Perhaps you are not the type of man for this country." She flung back her head, sending her rich red-gold hair cascading down over her shoulders. Tears stood in her eyes. "Oh, don't pin me down, Tom! I don't *know* what I mean!"

"All right, Ruth." Gravely he stood up and drew deeply on his cigarette and regarded her through slightly narrowed eyelids. Then he smiled. "It doesn't make any difference, Ruth. Not really. Because I love you, and I believe that you love me. That being so, everything else will come out in the wash."

## CHAPTER III

### *Nervous Politician*

LIFTING his hat with his customary courtesy, Reed left Ruth. Outside, the street was darkening now. Lights had sprung up in the livery and the saloon. He saw three more of Ed Blankenship's posters before he reached the end of Main Street and turned off the boardwalk to pace the short half block to Alice Finley's boarding house.

Tom Reed found himself wondering bitterly now as he walked if Ruth's vague fears were not symptomatic of a deeper underlying emotion. Perhaps she expected him to be brutal in his job, as so many sheriffs were brutal. Perhaps all women were subtly attracted to brutality.

He grinned mirthlessly to himself as he passed through the picket gate to the boarding house. There were many ways of sheriffing, he knew, but Tom Reed liked his own way. He liked it even though Ruth might not understand it, and Joe Eckstein might condemn it, and even though Ed Blankenship and Malcomb Jiles might take advantage of it. None of these things mattered, really, for Tom Reed had a stubborn pride in himself and his methods. Nevertheless he felt strain come back into his eyes as he tossed aside his cigarette and entered the boarding house.

The strain was in no way diminished by having to make conversation with the other guests at supper. Tom Reed was not naturally a talkative man; he found himself sighing with relief when he left the table and went up to his own room to put on a clean shirt. Then he went back downstairs and sought out Mary Jiles in the kitchen.

Mary Jiles was young Malcomb's wife. She was just finishing up the supper dishes when he entered the kitchen, a small pretty girl with a damp apron and rolled-up sleeves and utter weariness in her face. Tom Reed greeted her with a

friendly smile, and said:

"Care to sit on the porch a while, Mary?"

"Of course, Tom." She dried her hands and hung up her apron behind the stove. Her face looked even thinner than usual, Tom Reed thought, but he was unable to decide whether the thinness was physical or whether it was the result of emotional stress. He took her elbow and guided her through the house.

The front porch was in semi-darkness, illumined only by a distant lamp in the parlor shining through a window. He caught her sigh of weary relief as she sank into the porch swing. Wordlessly he sat beside her and began to rock the swing gently with his heels on the porch floor. He fished for his makings and tapped out tobacco.

"You've come about Mal?" she asked. Her voice had a faint troubled edge.

"Yes." He licked the cigarette and folded it together and twisted the ends. "Do you still love him, Mary?"

She turned toward him. Her face, outlined briefly by the lamplight from the parlor, looked drawn and haggard. "Tom, you ought to know the answer to that."

"Yes," he said, "I suppose I ought, Mary." And it was true; he knew a great deal about this girl. He had first seen her at Malcomb Jiles' trial, where he had been struck by the stark misery in her expression. Upon inquiry, he had learned that she was penniless, that she was expecting a baby. There had been nobody, it seemed, to take care of her.

TOM REED had done what he could. He had gotten her a job in the kitchen of Alice Finley's boarding house. Secretly he had given her enough money to see her through the birth of her baby, and a month later, its death. He had tried to cheer her as much as he could, to help her hold on to her pitiful remnants of pride.

But the things she needed most, a home and a husband, were not in Tom Reed's power to give.

He touched a match to his cigarette and said, "Why didn't you divorce him, Mary? The law says conviction of a felony is grounds for a divorce."

She shook her head gravely. "It would have been like kicking Mal when he was down."

That was something Tom Reed understood, and he nodded. Suddenly he found himself wondering what Ruth would have done in Mary's place. The thought made him twist uncomfortably.

"There's a job open," he said, "in Len Rawley's feed store. Might be just the thing for Malcomb."

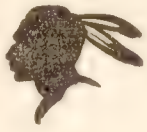
"It might." Her answer was curt, intended to express disinterest. But he caught a quaver of emotion in it, and he looked at her steadily.

"What are you going to do now, Mary? Now that Malcomb is coming out?"

Pride brought her chin high. "I'm not going back to living with him, if that's what you mean. He and I are finished, in all but the name."

Tom Reed smiled. "The name," he said, "means quite a lot. Remember, it's five years since Malcomb has seen a woman." He caught her glance of stark terror, and he said more gently. "You'd best stay right here in the rooming house for a while. He likely won't bother you here. Have you got a gun?"

She nodded bleakly. Her eyes were big and awe-struck at the picture his words



## Who Scalped Who?

THERE is considerable evidence that white men, not the Indians, started the practice of scalping. Records show that some Indians were scalped by white men. In 1725, a number of Indians were surprised by a group of New Hampshire volunteers and given this treatment. It is also recorded that a bounty of $100 was paid out of the public treasury at Boston for Indian scalps.

—*Harold Helfer*

called to her. "What are you going to do, Tom?"

"I don't know," Tom Reed said. "I am going to try to keep Malcomb out of trouble, Mary."

She glanced downward at her hands knotted in her lap. Tom Reed saw that she still wore the plain gold band around her finger. She began to twist the ring. "Tom," she said. Her voice was very low. "You know the way I feel about you. About the way you helped me when—when the baby came."

Tom Reed said, "You can just forget about that, Mary. You don't owe me any thanks."

"But I do," she whispered. "And the only way I can repay your help is to ask for more help." She leaned forward, and her voice became urgent.

She spoke swiftly, the words tumbling over one another.

"Tom, Mal told me five years ago, just before the trial, that he'd kill Ed Blankenship some day, if he lived. I think he will try to do that now.

"So do I, Mary." Tom Reed got up out of the swing and flipped cigarette ash off the edge of the porch. Then he turned and leaned against the rail and studied her pale face soberly. He wondered whether her concern for Malcomb now did not spring from love after all. Perhaps she, herself, did not know whether she still loved her husband.

He said, "I will try to stop it, Mary. Not as a favor to you, but because it is my job."

Her eyes were big and soft and full of pain.

"How, Tom?"

"I don't know." He snubbed out his cigarette on the porch rail. "But I have got to warn Ed Blankenship, because I might not be able to stop it. In that case, Ed has a right to know Malcomb will try to kill him."

IT WAS ten o'clock before Tom Reed turned into the wagon trail that led to Ed Blankenship's ranchhouse. It had taken him that long to get his horse from the livery and ride the twelve miles up the side of Dog Mountain. A half moon illumined the darkened two story house with the picket fence around it as he rode past the corrals.

Somewhere near the house a dog began to bark.

As Tom Reed halted by a whiteoak tree that grew near the picket fence, a bullet sang through the air past his head.

He heard the gunshot at the same instant. Instinct told him it came from the house, and in reaction to that instinct he threw himself sideways and away from the shying horse, toward the picket fence. He rolled, coming up against the bottom of the pickets with a slam that knocked breath from him. He wrapped his arms over his head and lay there, then, wedged tight against the fence, with his heart bumping wildly.

From the house, there was absolute silence. He could see through the crack between his arms that it was still dark. The barking dog struck up again some place in the rear, and Tom Reed could hear the clink as it lunged against its chain.

A cold sweat ran down his ribs.

Then a voice lifted, a voice hoarse with tension.

"Speak up!"

Tom Reed grinned sourly. He raised his head a little.

"It's Reed. Strike a light, Ed, you damned fool."

He heard a grunt, and presently a light came to life in the second story of the big white house. Tom Reed lay quietly until he saw the light vanish and reappear moments later at the front door. He got to his feet and walked through the picket gate.

Ed Blankenship was holding the front door open with a long barreled Colt revolver in his fist. Blankenship had on a white night shirt.

His big mustache looked black and oily in the half light.

"You damned near winged me, Ed." Tom Reed kept a tight grip on his anger. "You ought to know better than to go ahead and blast away into the night like that."

## CHAPTER IV

### *"I'm Going to Kill Him"*

ED BLANKENSHIP motioned Tom into the house with his gun barrel. His dark eyes seemed unnaturally bright to Tom, and there were deep grooves running from the corners of his nose down into his mustache. Inside, Blankenship silently led the way to his office, where he sat down at his roll top desk. Tom Reed took a leather covered chair, and pushed his hat to the back of his head.

"Ed," he said, "Malcomb Jiles isn't due out of the pen for two more days."

For the first time Ed Blankenship seemed to relax. The grooves disappeared from his face, and he leaned back and propped his big bare feet on the desk. "I didn't know just when his time was up."

Tom Reed grinned. "That's the way I figured it." He got out his makings and built a smoke and studied Ed Blankenship. Blankenship was a heavy balding man of fifty with a big mustache. Even in a nightgown he looked impressive, a hard man to have for an enemy, a stern one for a friend. Blankenship had started thirty years ago with a homesteaded quarter section and three old cows. He had traded two of the cows for a bull and gone on from there, until now he owned the biggest ranch in the county. Tom Reed suspected that Blankenship's history showed a single-mindedness which might not be as admirable as it looked on the surface.

"Young Jiles has not forgotten you, though, Ed," he said finally.

"You think I don't know that?" Ed Blankenship yanked open his desk drawer and took out a cigar and bit at the end of it savagely. "The damned young whelp made enough threats five years ago."

Tom Reed nodded. He struck a match and lit Blankenship's cigar with it, then touched the flame to his own cigarette. He blew out the match and said, without looking at Blankenship, "You sent the boy to prison, didn't you, Ed?"

Blankenship's dark eyes took on a puzzled look. "You know I did, Tom. He was guilty. He stole my cattle."

"Sure, Ed. And you bought the kid's place, after he was sent to the pen and the bank foreclosed, didn't you?"

"Yeah." A knot of muscle bulged in Blankenship's big jaw.

"And you knew the boy was in debt, even before he stole your cattle. He came to you for a loan, so he could pay the bank. And you turned him down."

"What the devil has that got to do with it!" Ed Blankenship almost shouted the words. He was leaning forward with his big hands on his knees and the cigar jutting from the corner of his mouth. The grooves were back in his face again now. "I might have been a little tough on the boy, Tom. But I sure as hell never forced him into stealing. He thought that up on his own hook."

Tom Reed nodded. He spoke quietly. "I reckon he did at that, Ed."

HE LEANED back in his chair and reflected that Ed Blankenship was right, or anyway almost right. It was still a rough country. Dog eat dog, and the devil take the hindmost. And if circumstances could force a young boy like Malcomb Jiles into theft, nobody could really blame Ed Blankenship for manipulating those circumstances.

These thoughts disturbed Tom Reed. It seemed to him that there was a certain sadness in the fact that aggressive men, ambitious pushing grasping men like Ed Blankenship, were the successful ones. Maybe that explained why he, himself, had nothing and would never have anything. And didn't care.

A man got what he wanted, Tom Reed reflected, if he was willing to pay the price. But he had to pay for what he got. Reed found himself wondering whether Ed Blankenship had yet done his share of paying.

He said quietly, "Ed, what are you going to do if this boy comes after you?"

Ed Blankenship took the cigar out of his mouth and grinned. His teeth, Tom Reed noted, were stained yellow from

tobacco. "I am going to kill him," Blankenship said flatly. "If he so much as looks cross-eyed at me, Tom, I will shoot him down like a rabid cur."

Tom Reed pushed angrily to his feet. His hands began to shake with a rage he could not control. He turned his back on Blankenship and stalked to the window and stood there staring out into blackness. This was the fundamental fault of a rough country, he thought. This harsh pride that would let a man kill rather than admit he was wrong. At the moment he felt a black hatred for Ed Blankenship, and he swallowed hard and put his shaking hands in his pockets and forced himself to stand there at the window until he slowly brought his emotion under control. At length he turned. Strain was pulling at the corners of his eyes as he went back and took his seat.

"Ed," he said gravely. "I am still sheriff of this county. You may beat me in the election two weeks from now, but until then I am sheriff. So I want to warn you to be damned careful of the situation if you kill that boy. It better be self-defense, Ed, and good self-defense. Because if it isn't, I will arrest you for murder."

Ed Blankenship's eyes narrowed until they were black pinpoints in the heavy gray mass of his face. He shook his head. "You'll never arrest me for murder, Tom. You haven't got the guts. You'd have to kill me to arrest me, and you have never killed a man or never will."

"I have never killed a man, Ed," Tom Reed nodded. "And I hope I never will. But I could kill you, if I had to." He stood up and looked down on the night-shirted figure of Ed Blankenship, seeing the grooves of tension in Blankenship's face with a sensation of pity. "Ed, you are a damned fool. You think any man with bluff and swagger and a gun on his hip could be sheriff. You think outlaws are afraid of guns. Ed, every outlaw in the state would laugh like hell if you were elected and, after they got through laughing, they would ride to Red Fork County and run you ragged."

He paused and smiled grimly. "What outlaws are afraid of is a man who can hit what he aims at. That's why I spend a half hour every day shooting at tin cans behind the courthouse. The news of that gets around, Ed. It's what keeps the county peaceful."

PULLING down his hat, then, he stalked to the door. There he turned with his hand on the knob, and now for the first time he let his anger show in the thin flicking of lips against his teeth.

"Ed," he said, "you might beat me on the draw. But all I need is one shot. And if I have to, I can get off one shot with your bullet through me."

He felt bitter and restless and useless as he left Blankenship's ranch and rode back to town through the white moonlight. He had accomplished exactly nothing. Young Malcomb Jiles would still return to Red Fork County determined to kill Blankenship. Blankenship was still determined to shoot at Jiles first and ask questions afterwards. In addition there was the election to worry about, and the strange behavior of Ruth Cornett. Tom Reed went to bed that night with a haunted feeling.

But he arrived at his office at the usual time next morning. He found Joe Eckstein there, just handing over their guns and personal effects to the two sobered cowhands of yesterday. The two punchers grinned sheepishly at Tom Reed and tendered their apologies. Sober, they appeared as Tom had known they would, decent, honest boys with nothing mean or vicious about them. They offered to pay for the damage to Ruth Cornett's hats and display case. Not wanting to accept the money himself, Tom Reed sent them to Ruth with his good wishes.

After going over his mail, he checked his prisoners in the county jail, of whom there were two. One was complaining of a bellyache. Tom Reed sent for the doctor, even though he knew there were no county funds to pay for medical care of prisoners. The other complained about the food. Reed promised to check up with the restaurant from which it came.

He spent the next two days campaigning. He was a pretty good campaigner

when he put his mind to it. He knew that his slow smile and steady gaze impressed other men, and that his record as sheriff was a good one. If it had not been for the enormous influence of Ed Blankenship, through the men he hired and the merchants with whom he dealt and his partial control of the bank, there would have been no doubt of this election. More than one small rancher admitted shamefacedly that Blankenship had extended a mortgage for him recently, that Blankenship was not the kind of man to give favors for nothing, and that Blankenship had made that clear.

And through it all, Tom Reed was conscious of the nagging worry about Malcomb Jiles. But he reached no decision. He had still reached no decision two days later when, on a hunch, he met the night train.

His hunch paid off, because the only passenger to alight from the train was Malcomb Jiles.

## CHAPTER V

### *Defiant Jailbird*

UP AHEAD, Reed saw Jiles moving past the baggage trucks as the train ground into motion and began to pull away with a shuddery chugging noise from the engine. Light from the moving cars flashed on Malcomb Jiles' face, highlighting the gaunt angularity of it. Jiles was pale, Tom Reed saw, and the noise of the moving train seemed to disturb him. He was licking his thin lips and darting furtive glances around. And already he had gotten a gun from somewhere. The gunbelt strapped around his lean waist was drawn up to the last notch, and still it seemed too big.

Tom Reed called, "Jiles!"

The man spun as if something had struck him. His hands were at his sides, the fingers spread into wide claws. Tom Reed moved forward as the caboose flashed past, wondering what young Jiles was nervous about this soon.

"Glad to see you back, son. You remember me. I'm Reed." Smiling, he reached for Malcomb Jiles' hand and got it and shook it. Jiles' hand was limp. His eyes were brown, Tom Reed saw, big brown eyes that looked at him, then through him, as if they didn't see him at all. Tom Reed controlled an impulse to scowl.

"We want you to feel at home," he said genially. "I been scouting around, looking for a job that might interest you—"

"Forget that." Malcomb Jiles bit off the words. "I ain't staying in town long."

Tom Reed rubbed his chin with the knuckle of his thumb, studying the boy thoughtfully now. He saw the prison defiance plainly enough, but any man coming out of the penitentiary was likely to be defiant. In itself, that defiance meant nothing. What counted was Jiles' intentions.

Reed said, "I'd hoped you'd settle down with us. But if you're only going to be here a while, I'd appreciate it if you'd check your gun in my office."

Malcomb Jiles' thin lips curled back in a sneer. "Any law against carrying a gun?"

Tom Reed shook his head affably. "No. It's just for your protection, son. Look, you've been away a long time. I don't suppose you liked it. I want to help you stay here. The best way for you to keep out of trouble is to check your gun."

Malcomb Jiles stared at him coldly. "All I want from you is to be let alone, Reed. Just stay out of my way."

"All right." Tom Reed felt his own voice go grim. "I just wanted to help you, Jiles. But one more thing. Stay away from your wife."

Malcomb Jiles' brown eyes flickered a little. He shook his head. "There ain't no law against a man's going to see his wife?"

This second mention of the law irritated Tom Reed. He felt blood flare to his face. "What do you aim to do, boy—anything you can get away with, just so long as there's no law against it?" He lowered his voice and jabbed a forefinger toward the youngster's thin chest. "Now, you

stay away from Mary. Law or no law, you let that girl alone."

HE FELT angry and baffled and defeated as he stood by the baggage truck and watched Malcomb Jiles' lean figure disappear into the darkness, then stalked back up the street alone. It was his own helplessness that bothered Tom Reed. All the methods in which he believed seemed useless, senseless now. He should have been one of the bold bad ones, he thought. Like Ed Blankenship. He couldn't see Ed Blankenship giving two hoots in hell about Mary Jiles. Ed wouldn't have even bothered to meet Jiles at the train. He'd have waited till Jiles got in trouble, then thrown a gun on him and killed him if he tried to fight.

That was the kind of brutality, Reed thought bitterly, that would appeal to Ruth. He wondered now as he passed through the darkened residential streets of the town, whether he was wrong, whether he had some lack, some flaw. For the first time in his life Tom Reed began to wonder whether he was a failure.

His thoughts were interrupted by a scream. He came alert instantly. The scream had come from behind and to his left, in the direction of Alice Findley's boarding house. Tom Reed whirled and began to run.

He saw the two figures on the front porch of the boarding house as he left the street and began to cross the lawn. The half-light from the lamp in the parlor was enough to show him that they were Malcomb and Mary Jiles. They were on their feet before the swing. Malcomb had Mary's wrist, and he was holding it high, trying to pull her toward him with the other hand. Her hair was half over her face; she was struggling desperately.

Tom Reed bellowed, "Stop it, Jiles!" And then he was on the porch and he caught Malcomb's shoulder and flung him away from the girl. Malcomb Jiles' light body spun into the porch railing, and he hung there a moment with the lamplight shining back out of his eyes.

"Get in the house, Mary," Tom Reed said.

He heard her sobbing intake of breath, heard the floor creak as she began to move. Then Malcomb Jiles straightened, pushing himself away.

"Stay where you are. A married man's got his rights!"

Tom Reed moved forward, then, with rage clutching at his throat. He said, "Jiles, you—"

Too late, he saw that Malcomb Jiles was drawing his gun. It was incredibly swift. Tom Reed flung himself forward, putting his own body between the gun and Mary just as flame belched and a solid, club-like object struck him somewhere in the vicinity of the arm and twisted him like a giant hand. He struck the floor. Pain came in waves. He was vaguely aware of the thud of running feet as Malcomb Jiles leaped over the porch rail and vanished into darkness.

He heard Mary scream again, and then the pain thickened and the world swam. But through it all he kept a kind of cold mental clarity. He knew that he was only shot in the arm, and the left arm at that. He knew that all he needed was a bandage and maybe a shot of whisky. That after he had had these things, he would still be able to ride and to shoot. He would still try to keep Malcomb Jiles from killing Ed Blankenship.

AFTER the first moments of inevitable confusion, Tom Reed got to his feet and sank into the porch swing, clutching his injured left arm. Somebody brought a lamp to the porch, and he became aware of a cluster of faces. Among the faces was that of Mary Jiles, and presently, Ruth Cornett. Mary and Ruth began to shoo the others away.

It was a time of pain for Reed, but he knew that it was Mary and Ruth who doctored him. They told him that the bullet had gone cleanly through muscle, that the wound was relatively harmless. That didn't make it hurt any less, but Tom Reed managed to grin at them. He kept the steady, fixed grin on his face while they poured alcohol on his arm, then bound it tightly with strips of torn sheet. And presently they did bring him

that drink of whisky, and the pain began to recede.

As the pain faded, Tom Reed became more conscious of the faces of the women. They were white-cheeked and calm, as they should have been. But in the eyes of Mary Jiles there was a deep unhappiness. And as for Ruth—Ruth was staring at him accusingly, even now.

"This comes," Ruth said tautly, "from not carrying a gun, Tom."

Tom Reed found himself smiling wryly. "Does it, Ruth?"

Tears came to her eyes. "Can't you see it's because I love you, Tom? I know that you are in danger, without a gun. I—I can't stand that."

"Can't you?" He closed his eyes a moment, grimacing with the ache that was settling into his arm. He sensed there was a feverish look to his face. He said, "Ruth, loving me ought to show you why I do not carry a gun. But even if you don't understand, nothing is changed by that. I must do my job in my own way. You've got to understand that—"

"You're a fool!" Blood rushed hotly to her cheeks. "Only a fool would try to act gentlemanly to a vicious lot of thieves and killers!"

Mary Jiles, pale to the lips, whirled on Ruth.

"You are the fool, Ruth." Mary was shaking with the intensity of her emotion. "You don't understand. You are blind. You don't know what Tom Reed is, or what he is trying to do." Mary's voice was low, and there was a strange humility in it. "If I had a man like that—a good man like Tom to love—"

She broke off, bringing the back of her hand to her mouth. Her eyes were big as walnuts.

Ruth Cornett turned and stared at Mary. The high color of her cheeks slowly faded, as she read a meaning into this —a meaning that might or might not be there, Tom Reed thought, but which Ruth read there anyhow. Ruth kept staring at Mary as if she had never seen the girl before. Then she turned and Tom Reed felt her haunted look pass over him for just a moment before Ruth went down the porch steps and off into the lonely night, a suspicion of tears in her eyes.

TOM made no attempt to follow her. Not now. For Ruth was a personal problem to him, something not connected with his job. His job right now was to keep Malcomb Jiles from killing Ed Blankenship, and no matter how much it might hurt, Ruth would have to wait. Tight-jawed, he turned to Mary and touched his right hand to his hat before stepping off the porch and striding up the boardwalk toward his office.

He kept a fresh change of clothes in his office, always packed for emergencies. Now he changed painfully into a clean shirt, wincing with the ache of his wounded arm. Then, very soberly, he lifted his gunbelt from its peg on the wall and strapped it around his hips and loaded the gun. The action was slow and deliberate.

This was one of the things that Ruth had not understood. That he was not afraid to carry a gun at all. That under necessity he would do anything he needed to do to perform his job. It seemed to Tom Reed now that his job called for the use of a gun, and that was why he put it on.

He left a note for Joe Eckstein on his desk, where Joe would find it in the morning.

Ten minutes later he was riding out of town at a gallop.

Lights were blazing in the big white ranchhouse of Ed Blankenship. Behind the house the dog was barking hoarsely. Tom Reed tied his horse to the whiteoak tree and moved quietly through the picket gate and up the lawn. Inside, he could see Malcomb Jiles' back as the youngster stood against a window.

Ed Blankenship faced Malcomb Jiles across the room. Blankenship had on knee-length riding britches this time, instead of a nightgown. He had on a white shirt and a black bow tie. His mustache looked startlingly black against the pallor of his big face as he stared at Malcomb Jiles.

Malcomb Jiles had his gun in his fist.

## CHAPTER VI

### *Path of Peace*

MAKING no particular effort to be quiet, Tom Reed moved up onto the porch. He crossed the porch with his arms swinging loosely at his sides. He entered the house without knocking.

Malcomb Jiles had spun to include him, as well as Ed Blankenship, in the sweep of his gun. Jiles' lips twitched in a nervous grimace. The youngster moved backward a step or so; Tom Reed noted that his fingers on the gun butt were white with tension, and his eyes looked red and grimed. Tom Reed grinned at Ed Blankenship.

"So he did slip up on you, after all, Ed," Reed said.

Ed Blankenship got one corner of his mustache in his mouth and chewed on it. Then he spat savagely.

"Damn you to hell, Tom! Why didn't you shoot him, instead of barging in here like an infernal idiot?"

Tom Reed grinned again. He was getting a strange, unnatural pleasure out of this. "That's like you, Ed." He turned, then, toward the boy. "Malcomb," he said quietly, "you can't kill Ed now, you know. Because you'd have to kill me, first. And even though you've got a gun in your hand and mine is still on my hip, and I've only got one good arm, you can't kill me without dying yourself."

Malcomb Jiles shifted uneasily. His eyes darted from one corner of the room to the other. That was the first hopeful sign, Tom Reed thought. For the boy was thinking of himself now. He was not blind with vengeance and hatred any longer.

"I heard about you in the pen," Malcomb Jiles said. "They know you down there. All the outlaws know you." His lip twitched. "But I reckon I could put a bullet in the right place to stop you—"

Reed smiled. "Want to try it?" he suggested. "Want to see whether shooting me would be your own death warrant, boy?"

When Malcomb Jiles didn't answer, when the youngster only stood there with his lips twitching, Tom Reed nodded gravely and went on,

"I wanted to talk to you at the station, Malcomb. I had no way to make you listen, then. But you've got to listen now, because you've got a bear by the tail and can't let go." He paused, wanting to make his meaning absolutely clear. "Malcomb, you've done some things wrong tonight, but if you'll holster your gun and go back to town and get an honest job, Ed and I will forget this ever happened. And that's a promise."

Ed Blankenship grunted, "Speak for yourself."

Tom Reed grinned. "I can vouch for Ed. I can bring him around." He reached into his shirt pocket with his good hand and brought out makings. He got a paper between his fingers and carried the sack over to Ed Blankenship. Blankenship's dark eyes were utterly expressionless as he shook tobacco into the cupped paper that Tom Reed held there. Grinning, Tom took the sack and dropped it back in his shirt pocket, then faced Malcomb Jiles again.

"It's all in what a man wants, Malcomb," he said. He folded the paper with the tobacco in it over his forefinger. "A man can get most anything he wants, if he is willing to pay the price. But the price for some things is high—too damned high."

HE LICKED the paper, keeping his eyes on the youth. Malcomb Jiles' lip had stopped twitching. He was watching Tom Reed with a slightly puzzled expression.

"You want to kill Ed, here," Tom Reed said, "and to tell the truth, I don't blame you a hell of a lot." He heard Ed Blankenship's outraged snort and ignored it. "But the price is too high, Malcomb. The price for killing Ed is a rope. It ain't worth it, and you know it."

He twisted the cigarette into shape now, using the strong fingers of his right hand. He had no idea whether this talk was going to do any good at all; he only

knew that it seemed part of his job to say these things. And because he believed them, he could say them with intensity.

"But other things in life are fairly cheap. And better things than killing, too. You know what I mean. An honest job. The respect of other men. A wife."

Malcomb Jiles sneered. "Yeah, a wife. You saw what my wife thinks of a jailbird."

Tom Reed shook his head. Somewhere in him was a pain that had nothing to do with his wounded arm. "She loved you once," he said. "Maybe she will again, if she has a chance. But you've got to give her that chance, Mal."

He was letting that soak in, fumbling in his pocket for a match, when footsteps thumped on the porch outside. Joe Eckstein's voice bellowed hoarsely, "Tom! You in there?"

Tom Reed cursed silently. Things were getting too complicated to handle now, he thought.

"Come on in, Joe," he called. "But keep your gun buttoned up."

To his surprise, Mary Jiles came in with Joe. Malcomb Jiles grasped his gun tighter as the two of them crossed the room to stand beside Tom Reed and Blankenship. Joe Eckstein was mouthing half-audible curses. Mary gasped when she turned and saw her husband.

"What are you so surprised about?" Malcomb Jiles said harshly to his wife. "Didn't you figure I'd come here, after you kicked me out?"

Tom Reed bit his lip and waited now for the flash of pride from Mary—the outrush of bitterness that would anger Malcomb Jiles and make him lose his head again. Tom Reed closed his eyes and waited for it, thinking that he had lost, that circumstances had been against him. If he could have had ten minutes more with the boy. . . .

But the outrush did not come. Instead, Mary shook her head. Her face looked very tired and pinched and defeated.

"Anyhow I'd hoped you wouldn't, Mal," she said quietly.

Malcomb Jiles looked at her strangely. His face was working, and there was moisture on his upper lip.

Mary said, "I thought you might want a job. I've—I've got one for you. At the feed store."

That was when Malcomb Jiles slowly lowered his gun. He stuck the gun in holster, and he shook his head very gently, and for the first time Tom Reed saw that Malcomb was thoughtful. Malcomb scratched his head. He looked amazingly like a small boy who has just solved a puzzling problem in arithmetic.

"I'll be damned if I don't think I'll take it," Malcomb Jiles said.

TOM REED felt his own big face break into a broad grin, then. He saw the tears and the smile come to Mary's face, and he motioned her forward with his thumb. He looked at Ed Blankenship, and at Joe Eckstein. He jerked his head toward the door.

The three of them moved silently out of the room toward the porch.

It wasn't until they reached the darkened porch that Tom Reed remembered the cigarette in his hand. He stuck it in his mouth and struck a match. The match flared brilliantly in the darkness.

As he lit his smoke, Tom Reed thought with a kind of satisfaction that he had done his job again. He was a good sheriff, the kind of sheriff he wanted to be. And if his own life was something of a mess....

He shrugged. He was aware that Joe Eckstein was standing beside him, cursing in a soft and singsong manner. Ed Blankenship, on the other side, was silent. Finally Blankenship took a cigar out of his shirt pocket and began to chew it thoughtfully.

"Couple of my punchers had a run-in with you the other day, Tom."

Tom Reed said, "Oh?"

"If it'd been me," Blankenship said, "I'm afraid I'd have shot those boys when they tried to fight." He paused, and his voice deepened. "They're good boys."

Tom Reed said, "Yes, Ed. I agree."

Blankenship coughed. "All right, damn it, Tom. You know what I'm getting at. I'll withdraw from the sheriff's race tomorrow."

Tom Reed looked toward him gravely. "I don't want you to do it out of gratitude, Ed."

"It's not gratitude, damn it," Blankenship snapped. Then his big gray face sobered. "You were talking back there about what a man wants, Tom. I wanted the sheriff's job—well, hell, just because I wanted it. Like a kid might want a toy. But I think you want it—damn it—you want it to *give* something to the job, instead of having the job give something to you."

Tom Reed grinned. "For a grown man, Ed, you talk a lot of pap. I think I'll go get my horse."

Yet as Tom Reed stepped off the porch he knew that the things Ed had said weren't pap. They were a rough unpolished approach to the things he felt, and he experienced a deep sense of joyous pride that he had made Ed Blankenship, at least, understand. He walked down the lawn and through the picket gate with his shoulders set at a squarer angle than they had been for weeks.

And there, standing in the shadows of the whiteoak tree, was Ruth. Tom Reed's heart jumped toward his throat and began to slam rapidly.

"I couldn't wait," Ruth said. She came toward him. She had been crying. The tears still glistened on her cheeks, bright cool silver in the moonlight. "Oh, Tom, I couldn't wait. After being so cruel to you—"

Tom Reed smiled and took her in his good arm, wincing a little with the pain of his wound.

"Why, Ruth," he said, "I couldn't wait, either. I'm glad you're here. We can ride back to town together." • • •

# HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW YOUR WEST?

Counting each question as worth 20 points, you'll really be riding high, wide and handsome if you can get all five and score 100. If you rate 80, with four correct answers, you're still a top hand on anyone's ranch. Three, or 60, entitle you to a place at the grub pile, but less than that, you're a tenderfoot. Let's go! Answers are on page 114—if you MUST look!

1. The White Elephant was a famous bar and gambling resort in Fort Worth in the old days. Name the more famous gambler and crack shot who owned it.

2. From what country in particular did a good percentage of the Tombstone miners come from?

3. In what western state is the largest known cliff dwelling in the world?

4. What famous writer of short stories, including Westerns, once was a bank clerk in Austin, Texas?

5. Beside its quality, why was Arbuckles' a favored coffee of range hands?

*A True-Fact Story*

# Coiled Killer

## by Ferris Weddle

THE bewhiskered old-timer sauntered into the saloon and casually set a canvas covered object on one end of the long bar. He ordered a whisky, twisted sideways, and let his mild blue eyes wander over the assorted patrons in boots and big hats.

"Make that two, barkeep," he said. "My friend, Bill, needs a shot, too, I'm thinkin'." He indicated the canvas-covered object.

The barkeep didn't even blink. He was used to these "crazy desert rats." He set up the second glass. Then he not only blinked, he yelped and leaped back.

*Common-Sense Rules for Rattling the Rattler!*

In the huge, wide-mouthed glass jar reposed a rusty brown desert rattlesnake.

"H-hey! Get that thing to hell out of here!" the barkeep stuttered.

"Ain't nothin' to worry about," drawled the oldster. "Bill's plumb tame. Besides he can't get out of the jar."

The cowboy standing next to the oldster wasn't too sure the snake couldn't get out, so he moved away. Somehow, in a magical way, the word "rattlesnake" spread throughout the bar room and a peculiar silence was noted. Soon a crowd edged up to the desert rat who was calmly finishing the second glass of whisky.

"Why have you got the reptile bottled up?" The question buzzed through the crowd.

*Oldster Issues Challenge*

The oldster hitched up his baggy trousers and explained. "Bill's my meal ticket, boys. And before you lose your money, I'll warn you that you will lose it. Here's the idea: I got a ten-dollar gold piece here that says no man can keep his hand on the glass until I count up to ten if Bill decides to strike."

The saloon patrons discussed this, and the oldster added his clincher to the challenge, "Mind you, I've run across a few men who had nerves steady enough to keep their hand and eyes steady, but mighty few."

A coin clinked on the bar, and a voice boomed out, "I can do it, old timer."

A solid ring formed around the oldster, his snake and the challenger. "You're expected to keep your eye on the snake," the reptile owner repeated. He began to count, "One, two, three, four, five—"

The droning count had reached seven when Bill came alive, hissed and buzzed and struck at the hand. The cowboy jerked his hand back as though he had been burned—and the crowd roared with nervous laughter. Another contender stepped forward and the old desert rat made more money in one hour than he had been able to make in a lifetime following the elusive trail of gold!

This story, based on truth, is illustrative of the folklore that has grown up around the rattlesnake. Ranking with the wolf, coyote and cougar as the instigator and inspiration for tales, tall and true, no other form of western wildlife is more capable of causing terror in both the tenderfoot and the native than the rattlesnake. The terror is justified, for the rattler is the coiled killer which does not always buzz a warning.

From the burning sand ledges of below-sea-level Death Valley to the bare sides of mountain peaks above timber line, every western state has several of the forty species and subspecies of rattlesnakes known to exist in the United States. Arizona, alone, has fifteen of these species or subspecies, and Texas has nine. Records reveal that more people die of snakebite in Texas than any other state.

From the time they are able to understand, children in western families, especially the families on isolated ranches, are taught to respect and by-pass the coiled killers, or to kill them when the opportunity presents itself. Snakebite miles from medical assistance is often fatal. I remember an instance in central Texas when I was a boy that two young ranch hands were killed by *one* diamond-back rattler.

Jed and Ned Vellens were twin brothers, both all-around good cowhands, born and raised in rattlesnake country. They had killed scores of the reptiles. On this day, Jed was working some range several miles from the ranch house. He had dismounted to inspect some broken fence near a pile of rocks. He left his horse ground-reined. Perhaps Jed had his mind on other things, for he did not inspect the pile of rocks as he checked the break in the fence, his back to the rocks. When he heard the dry, *whirrrring* rattle of the snake, it was too late. The fangs of the huge diamond-back sank into the soft flesh of the back of his calf, one fang tearing into the boot top.

When the snake rattled, Jed's horse threw up its head with nervous terror, and started to sidle away.

Jed had moved back, quickly, his eyes

on the coiled, rattling snake. He glanced at his horse, and must have spoke to him urgently.

"Whoa, boy, it's all right!"

But the smell of the fetid snake and the buzzing rattles was too much for the animal. It bolted.

Calmly, then, Jed Vellens killed the snake. He sat down and applied a tourniquet above the fang marks. Awkwardly, after sterilizing the blade of his knife, he made two criss-cross incisions in the snake wound, squeezing the dark blood out. The leg was swelling rapidly. Realizing that he would not live long if he tried to walk through the hot sun to the ranch, Jed sat down beneath the meager shade of a small cottonwood and waited, loosening the tourniquet occasionally and making more cuts in the swollen leg.

Night was falling when Ned and two companions found the brother. He was still alive, but barely so, and gangrene had set in because he had been unable to loosen the tourniquet to allow some normal flow of blood, after a while. That night Jed Vellens died.

### *The Second Victim*

A month later, Ned Vellens was the second victim of the diamond-back. He had been wearing his brother's boots, and lodged inside the top of the left boot was the broken, but still lethal fang of the snake. It rubbed into Ned's leg calf. Since he had seen no rattlers, the cause of the extreme swelling in his leg did not occur to Ned nor to others on the ranch. Coupled with a great deal of exertion on a hot day, the poison had its deadly effect.

King or queen of the rattlesnake kingdom is the diamond-back, with the eastern variety growing somewhat larger, which means a length crowding eight feet in rare instances. Six feet diamond-backs are quite frequent. The western diamond-back has the questionable distinction of being the most formidable of all poisonous snakes in the United States, because of its powerful striking force behind extra large fangs carrying tremendous charges of poison, and because the population of this variety is huge.

### *Cowboy Kills Big Snake*

I remember one old grand-daddy of a diamond-back in north Texas. It was so huge and heavy it did not stir far from the rock den where it lived, at least not in the daytime. Several people who glimpsed the huge snake said it was over seven feet. Several attempts were made to kill this king rattler but it always managed to escape into its den. One day, however, the snake made the mistake of swallowing a jackrabbit it had managed to catch. The rabbit made such a bulge in its stomach that the snake could not re-enter its den, and so was killed by a cowhand.

But diamond-back or desert sidewinder, swamp, timber, or prairie rattler, the coiled killers make even the bravest of men turn pale and tremble. I knew one ardent sportsman who quit hunting after he had stepped on a rattler which was too cold to strike. Other hunters and outdoorsmen refuse to sleep on the bare ground in rattlesnake country. In cool weather, the rattlers do have an annoying habit of seeking the warmth of a bedroll near a fire, or the warmth of a sleeper! One of the most successful—and most dangerous—ways of making a man commit suicide is to make him think there is a rattler with him in his bedroll, or to put a dead one in the roll to be super-realistic. No man seems responsible for his actions, whether the snake is alive or dead. The effect is the same.

The rattlesnake joke is an old one, and a cruel one. There are instances on record where the victims turned on the jokester with murder in their eyes—and carried out the threat. Near-murder was committed in one instance of such horseplay related to me. A man who was particularly fearful of rattlesnakes crawled into his bedroll one night and shoved his bare toes against the cool coils of a rattler. At the same time, the jokester, with the rattles attached to a long stick, buzzed them at the foot of the bedroll. The man lay starkly

still for a second, then he literally tore out of the roll, screaming. Other members of the party had not been told of the plan by the practical joker so they thought the man had gone suddenly mad. The jokester, however, was doubled over with laughter. His laughter ceased abruptly.

The victim faced him, a revolver in his shaking hand. He cursed him long and slowly, then he cocked the gun, while the practical joker tried to talk him out of the killing. Someone managed to slip up behind the furious would-be killer and take the gun away from him. This action cured the jokester of further rattlesnake horseplay!

*Rattlers Are Dangerous*

Whether it is the twenty-inch desert sidewinder, the shy western ground rattler, or the seven-foot diamond-back, the rattlesnake is no joke. The bites of all types can be deadly, in a major or minor degree depending on the size and type, and the striking power. The best way to be sure of not encountering a rattlesnake is to stay out of rattlesnake country. But you can say, rightly, that this covers a lot of territory.

Although the rattlers are partial to dry, rocky country, I've found the timber rattler on 8,000-foot mountain trails, and along cold, rushing mountain streams; the western massasauga and other swamp types lie in wet bottom lands and along torpid southern streams; the desert has many varieties from the sidewinder to the vicious *mojave;* in the prairie country will be found the prairie rattler; in burrows and prairie dog holes is the timid ground rattler.

In Arizona desert country I've found rattlers of several types stretched upon the warm pavement of roads on cool nights, and I've watched the antagonistic desert rattler climb mesquite bushes higher than my head, ill-tempered, rattling without provocation when they tried to shed their old skins. Almost blind, rattlers shedding their skins will strike at any and everything, without warning in many instances. In our desert home, we found them in our yard, under the house and coiled in the clothes closets.

No, when you say rattlesnake country, you cover most of the western outdoors. So, you try to minimize the danger of snakebite by observing a few sane rules: You wear high-top boots, with the trousers *outside* in country where you know the snakes are numerous. You are careful when walking among boulders and rocks, and in climbing ledges where rattlesnakes den up, or sun themselves. You are especially careful in the cool of evening when you go walking for most rattlers hole up in the daytime and start moving about when the temperature cools off. You *don't* shove your hands under ledges, or into dens and burrows.

And above all, when you are out for any period of time some distance from medical aid, you carry a first-aid kit for snakebite—and know how to use it. Many doctors assert that the wrong kind of first aid is often more fatal than the snakebite itself.

*Rules for Treatment*

These simple rules, memorized, may save your life, or a friend's:

1. Immediately after being struck, put a tourniquet between the bite and the heart. Don't cut off all circulation and loosen the tourniquet every ten or fifteen minutes for a minute or so to allow some normal circulation of the blood. The idea is not to cut off the blood supply but to allow the heart to take the poison in as small doses as possible. Gangrene is the alternative.

2. Cut the snake wound with a sterilized knife or razor blade. Some authorities say a criss-cross cut is best, others maintain that the cut should be *lengthwise* so that tendons or muscles won't be cut, and also this lessens the possibility of cutting an artery.

3. Apply suction with the first-aid suction cup; or, with the mouth as a last resort, if the mouth is fairly clean, and if the person has no sores in his mouth.

This should be kept up until the victim is taken to the doctor.

4. As the arm or leg or other area where bitten continues to swell, make additional cuts and continue the suction.

5. *Do not,* at any time, give the victim whisky or other stimulants! This merely increases the circulation of the poisoned blood.

6. If you have the anti-venin, use it sparingly, if absolutely necessary and according to the directions with the vial. After-effects of the anti-venin are often worse than the bite if improperly used.

The big general rule superseding all of these is to keep the victim as quiet as possible. All exertion and excitement should be avoided. You might remember that only about fifteen per cent of snakebites are fatal, and that this percentage would be smaller if first-aid treatment is immediate, calm and careful.

You might remember, too, that your flirtation with danger is much less likely to result in disaster in rattlesnake country than on a traffic congested highway or street! The coiled killers are anxious to avoid contact with you, too!

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# UP WITH THE AWNINGS, BOYS!

## By WILL TALSEY

THE many motorists from the East and the middle-west, who are planning a tour to the Pacific Northwest, should include a visit to Burke, Idaho, for this small community has an individuality that is unique and interesting and something the tourists will talk about to friends, neighbors and relatives, when they get back home. And since Burke is only ten miles over good highway from Wallace, through which large city most of the East-West highways pass, there is not much difficulty nor time lost reaching Burke. The trip is certainly worth the time and expense to see the novel features possessed only by this small Idaho town.

What makes Burke a must to see is that it is the only known American town whose residents have to roll up the main-street store awnings when the trains come in. What is more, the only railroad track, the only highway and the only river are all one as they come down the only street in Burke. Finally, the train and tracks pass through the Eagle Hotel, the stream under it and the highway-street beside it.

But the Eagle Hotel has more to offer the guest. It is a rather modern four-story building with modern conveniences, which in itself is singular for a town with a population of less than 800. From each guest room there is a view that few hotels can offer, for Burke lies at the point and bottom of a V formed by sharply rising canyon walls. There was not enough room for both the railroad and the Eagle Hotel on the narrow canyon floor, so they built a tunnel for the train through the hotel and funneled the river under both.

Burke, though small in population, is big in its importance to the mining industry and owes its existence to the wealthy Heccla Mine. This mine has the most modern of buildings, machinery and equipment to bring out the wealth locked in the towering canyon walls, and it, too, was responsible for bringing the latest conveniences and necessities to the residents of Burke, something that is enjoyed by few communities as small as this Idaho town.

Yes, the motorist that travels to Burke will be the center of attraction back home when he tells his neighbors of the town that raises its store awnings when the trains of the Northern Pacific and the Union Pacific come chugging into town.

# HAM HOCKS and

## CHAPTER I

### *Rustler Roundup*

WITH sleeves rolled up to his pale, knotty elbows and gnawed pipestem clenched grimly between his teeth, Editor H. Greeley Snodgrass faced his rattly old typewriter to compose a red-hot editorial for the coming issue of his *Beaver Bend Weekly Roundup*.

A county election was coming up and Editor Snodgrass hankered to blast Sheriff Hiram Hornbeck loose from his job. The issue at stake was something more than politics. Only the week before, the tight-fisted sheriff had his campaign posters printed, not at the *Roundup's* job printery, but by some cut-rate, out-of-town shop.

This was a delicate personal matter that wouldn't have much influence with the voters, so Editor Snodgrass had to dig up some better argument for sluffing the sheriff into the discard.

It wasn't an easy job of mud-slinging. He stared for awhile at the wall calendar above his desk, then finally an idea came and he started pecking busily on the ancient Remington. The dancing letters formed words that grew into lines and then punchy sentences as he poured his wrathful resentment on paper.

He wrote:

With beef prices up to 30c on the hoof and T-bone steaks higher than a cat's back, cattle rustling has come to be a better paying occupation than bank robbery or jewelry store holdups. It is high time that Beaver Bend, capital of the cow country, took official notice of the threat. But what is Sheriff Hornbeck doing about it? What are Beaver Bend cattlemen getting for the tax dollars that go into Sheriff Hornbeck's pockets? The answer to both questions is nothing, absolutely nothing.

Editor Snodgrass paused to lean back, thumb his pipe and reach for a match. He struck it on the underside of his chair seat and cupped it to the pipe bowl, half-turning towards the smudged window as he did so, a window that looked out across Beaver Bend's main street to Waller's General Store on the opposite corner.

Something he saw over the top of his steel-rimmed specs made the Roundup editor forget to draw. The match burned down, scorching his fingers. He dropped it, gripped the arms of his chair and stared hard.

WHAT he saw was a pair of riders, strangers to Beaver Bend, dawdle up to the store hitchrail, and slide out of leather. The tall, sprung-jointed newcomer with a dribble of plugcut on his stubbly chin dropped the reins of a rangy, cheese-colored roan that had a long, mournful face that oddly resembled its rider's. The other man, a pot-bellied runt with a red, full moon face ground-hitched a fancy, two-toned job with a black mane and silver tail—a freak bay-sorrel. Both riders wore bedraggled cowboy clothes, dusty from long travel.

"Whopper" Whaley and "Swap" Bootle, job-dodging saddle bums, had hit Beaver Bend.

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*All the two escaped convicts craved from Swap and Whopper was some succulent grub—but Sheriff Hornbeck spilled the beans!*

# HOLLYHOCKS

## A Novelet by SYL MacDOWELL

*Swap and Whopper were soon bound fast to the tree*

Their arrival, timed as it was, fitted neatly into the groove of Editor Snodgrass' thoughts. He turned to his typewriter again and wrote:

The time has come for strangers in this community to be cautiously received and their movements watched, for eternal vigilance is the price of safety. Such watchfulness is properly the job of our sheriff. But what does Sheriff Hornbeck watch? Again the answer is nothing.

Again, the editor gave his attention to the characters, now on the store porch. They seemed to be exploring the pockets of their worn levis, pooling their re-

sources, then went inside.

Editor Snodgrass relit his pipe and barely had it going when they emerged. The tall one gave a hopeless shrug. His companion, with loppy-brimmed Stetson peeled off of his round head, scratched his tousled, straw-colored hair and heaved a sad sigh. They crossed the porch, stepped down and prepared gloomily to remount and depart.

On sudden impulse, Editor Snodgrass leaped out of his chair, bolted outside and hurried across the street. In the absence of any lawful scrutiny, it was a citizen's duty, he righteously thought, to find out who these suspicious characters were and what they were up to.

Swap and Whopper dully watched his approach.

"Heading somewhere?" Editor Snodgrass asked abruptly, and without any preliminary word of greeting.

Whopper gripped his saddle horn with a bony hand.

"Nope. Just passin' through, friend," he replied.

"Hunting work?"

That unpleasant suggestion brought a scared look to Whopper's long, horsey face.

"Goshlemity, no!" he croaked. "W-we're retired."

"Retired? Retired from what?"

"Cowpunching."

That sounded unconvincing. Cowhands, as Editor Snodgrass well knew, never got rich enough to retire. What he didn't know was that Swap and Whopper had retired on $40 between them, and that was years ago. They retired to dangle around, see the country and enjoy life.

"Well one thing's sure," he decided firmly, "you must have had some reason for coming here."

"Sure, friend. Came in for—for supplies."

"You weren't in the store long enough to get much. And I don't see anything you bought."

Swap spoke up, then, to head off some wild statement from his pardner. Whopper was a glib liar, loved to brag, and it didn't take much to get him started.

"We came to get ourselves a ham hock, mister," he stated.

"A ham hock?"

"Yessir, that's right. We got beans, plenty of beans. But did you ever try to live on plain, boiled beans, three times a day? What we craved was a ham hock to sort of flavor 'em up."

"Well then, why didn't you get it?"

WHOPPER started to speak, but little Swap headed him off again.

"For the simple reason," Swap told him, "that the measliest little old dried-up ham hock the man's got in the store is priced at seventy-nine cents. And all Mr. Whaley and me has got between us is sixty cents. That's why."

Editor Snodgrass drew the pipe from his mouth and thoughtfully tapped out the ashes on his upraised heel. He was beginning to realize that his first impression of this pair had been a mistaken one. No rustlers would be too hard up to buy a bean bone.

"Tain't that we're busted," Whopper lied forlornly. "It—it's just that we don't believe in living beyond our means."

Editor Snodgrass wasn't fooled. He smiled sympathetically. Moreover, a bold stroke of journalistic enterprise was taking shape in his mind. He also recalled that Herb Waller, the storekeeper, owed him an unpaid balance of $39.43 for advertising space.

"Come on, boys, let's go back inside," he suggested.

"For why?" Swap wanted to know.

"For you to pick yourselves out a ham hock. Any ham hock you want. The biggest one old Walleye's got. Sure, it's on me."

Whopper brightened and pranced back up onto the porch, grabbed the screen door and politely held it open.

"Reckon you can add on one more smallish item, friend?" he asked hopefully.

"What?"

"A slab of plugcut. How about it, huh?"

"Sure," agreed Editor Snodgrass amiably. "Sure thing."

Swap wasn't so elated by the outburst of generosity.

Swap knew that there always was a catch attached to such friendly gestures. He was beginning to learn the sad lesson that nobody ever got something for nothing. Charity had its own price tag.

He was right. When they came out, Editor Snodgrass sprung his proposition.

"Mind if I ask a little favor of you boys?"

Whopper, about to fang a big chew off the gift plugcut, spoke up with husky haste:

"Hold on, friend. If it's jobs, we just ain't—"

"Jobs? Ha! Not a lick of work involved. All I want you boys to do is to size up things around Beaver Bend."

"What things?" Swap wanted to know.

"See how the ranchers loose-graze their stock. All open range, hardly a fence, no herders. They're too trustful. It's like leaving a safe full of money unlocked. Suppose you observe their methods, then come back to town in two-three days and tell me how you think things ought to be handled. What you'd expect, by way of the law's protection, if you was raising cattle hereabouts."

"Sounds simple enough," Swap admitted.

"Sure, it is. Now down the road a little piece is a shady creek flat, nice place to camp and rest up, boys. Just keep your eyes open and your mouths shut, that's all."

"We'll shore do that, friend," Whopper declared heartily.

With a purposeful gleam in his eye, Editor Snodgrass hurried back to finish writing his editorial wallop, which he counted on knocking Sheriff Hornbeck out of the political arena.

He sat before his trusty Remington and briskly went to work.

Sheriff Hornbeck's do-nothing attitude should be remembered by Beaver Bend voters when they go to the polls on election day. In the meantime, the *Weekly Roundup*, as a public duty, has taken steps to offset this official neglect, which may any day result in a scourge of rustling. Without so much as one penny's cost to taxpayers, this enterprising newspaper has retained two —

Editor Snodgrass paused to think up an impressive-sounding phrase. It came to him and he wound up the editorial with:

— has retained a corps of well-seasoned range sleuths to guard and protect the neglected interests of stockmen of this vicinity. A report of their progress is due before this issue goes to press, so will appear in the news columns of following issues.

With a self-satisfied grin, Editor Snodgrass yanked the sheet of copy out of his typewriter and marked it for Page One. Sweet revenge was his.

"That'll have the sheriff guessing," he chortled to himself. "And all for the price of a ham hock."

## CHAPTER II

### *Sleepy Sleuths*

THE creek flat was an ideal campspot, with plenty of wood, water and grass. It didn't take Swap and Whopper long to light and take root. They staked out the horses, spread their soogans under the low-hanging boughs of a tall alder, and soon had a campfire built and a pot of beans bubbling on it, giving off the savory aroma of ham.

Whopper stretched out in the shade, watching his little pardner tend the fire.

"We sure was in big luck, meetin' up with that newspaper hombre," he droned.

"Mebbe so. Only thing is, he didn't tell us what's behind it all."

"What are you drivin' at?"

"Well, he halfway hinted at—at rustler trouble."

"Reckon he figgers on makin' scapegoats out of us, somehow?"

"Might be."

"Goshlemity, but you're a suspicious cuss! What for you want to go sourin' the milk of human kindness thataway?"

"You know the old saying, that it pays to look a gift horse in the mouth."

"Shucks, you look it over from both ends! Take things as they come, I say, and let the other fella worry!"

With that, Whopper tilted his hat over

his face, relaxed and snoozed. When the time came, he could give Editor Snodgrass his money's worth. With his lively imagination and talent for telling tall tales, Whopper intended to deliver a report that would make their newspaper friend sit up and take notice.

But already events were at work to produce results far beyond his expectations. Sheriff Hornbeck, moseying over to Herb Waller's store to get his afternoon mail, received a wanted circular issued by the warden of the state prison. The circular told of the escape of two desperate prisoners, Loophole Louie and Soupbone Sam.

There was the usual routine description, from which the sheriff made out that Loophole Louie was short and fat, Soupbone Sam tall and skinny. What interested him the most was the offer of a $100 reward for apprehension of the fugitive felons.

Sheriff Hornbeck was a slow-thinking man in size 44 pants, shiny in the seat and broad palms work-hardened from shaking hands with his constituents. As he leaned against a counter, absorbing the information, the gossipy storekeeper chirped:

"Seen Snoddy around with them hungry-lookin' gazabos, Sheriff?"

The lawman lifted his gaze from the circular and squinted at Herb Waller.

"What gazabos?" he grunted.

"A small-sized ball of lard and a lean hoppergrass that blew into town busted. Snoddy grubstaked 'em. Seen 'em in close confab out in front."

Sheriff Hornbeck removed his broad bulk from the suffering counter and crammed the wanted circular in a hip pocket.

"Notice whichaway they went from here?" he inquired, trying to conceal his excited interest.

"Seen Snoddy point down the creek road while they palavered."

"How long ago?"

"Oh, around noon, it was."

"How was they travelin'? On foot?"

"Uh-uh. Had horses. Peculiar-lookin' cayuses. Sort of a mouldy roan and a cirucsy sorrel, half blonde, half brunette."

Sheriff Hornbeck clamped his big black hat over one hard eye and clomped out onto the porch. He glared across at the *Weekly Roundup* office for a long, meditative moment, then decided it was no good trying to pump the editor. The sheriff knew that H. Greeley Snake-in-the-Grass, as he called him, was his political enemy.

What, then, would be finer than to prove that he was in cahoots with a pair of crooks on the dodge?

The way to cinch it would be to nab them.

A LITTLE while later, the sheriff dusted down the creek road with a shooting iron gunbelted to his wide middle. The way he reasoned out the affair, escaped prisoners would head for the hills. Certainly they wouldn't be so rash as to lurk in any nearby hideaway.

So reasoning, he had eyes glued to the road ahead. He passed Swap and Whopper in the snug campspot under the big alder without so much as a sideglance.

All afternoon, Sheriff Hornbeck scoured the outlands for sight or sign of a pair of fleeing riders. His manhunt wound up at nightfall without result. Tired, discouraged, baffled and hot under the collar he jogged back towards town in the early dark. The only thing left to do, he concluded, was to put the screws on Editor Snodgrass and see if he couldn't squeeze out some guilty admission.

About this time, two furtive figures slipped out of a thicket up the creek from Swap and Whopper's camp. They skulked along, close to cover, making their stealthy way to the road, and on beyond to a water tank beside the railroad tracks where a night freight was due to stop.

Loophole Louie and Soupbone Sam were gaunt with hunger. Except for a snack they had carried at the time of their prison break, and a tough old farm rooster they had stolen, they hadn't eaten for three days. Therefore, the tantalizing scent of ham and beans in the evening air drove them to desperation as they neared the camp flat. They saw the glimmer of campfire embers and made out two men

squatting in the faint glow, conversing in low voices.

"What do you say, Louie?" whispered Soupbone Sam, as the two of them crouched in a rooty tangle on the creek bank.

"I say this set-up is too good to pass up, pal," muttered Louie. "And look! Two horses!"

"Never rode a horse in my whole life," Soupbone murmured tensely.

"Me neither. But could I go for some good, hot chow! C'mon, Sam, let's take them bums to the cleaner, huh?"

Whopper was talking as they started their sneak advance.

"If you leave it to me, pardner, I'll tell that newspaper gent a yarn that'll make him plumb happy to keep us here for a long spell."

"Better go easy, Whopper," Swap warned uneasily. "What loony line do you figure on handin' him?"

"Here's one idea," Whopper said glibly. "Supposing I say we're about to tangle horns with some marauding outlaws."

"What a awful lie that'd be," scoffed Swap.

But it was no lie. Whopper, for once, had accidentally uttered stark truth. Never before had his fancy fabrications taken on substance and reality with such startling suddenness. As he spoke, the cat-footed desperadoes reached pouncing distance.

Louie rasped:

"Up and at 'em, Sam! Now!"

In the next instant, the unsuspecting pardners were overwhelmed. Louie sprang and clamped a stranglehold around Swap's neck. Soupbone Sam toppled Whopper with a left hook to his long, bony jaw, then pinned him to the ground with a knee against his skinny wishbone.

"Not a squawk out of either of you bums!" snarled Louie. "Not if you want to stay healthy, get it? Quick, Sam, get that rope off of that saddle there!"

Sam got the lariat and shook out the coils.

"Now we tie 'em to the tree, here," directed Louie, jerking Swap to his feet and seizing the rope with his free hand.

WITH a collarhold, Soupbone dragged Whopper to the base of the alder. Louie flung the gasping Swap beside him. They made short work of trussing them together against the alder trunk.

"Now for the horses!" gritted Louie.

"How about grub?" growled Soupbone.

"We'll lug that along, pal! C'mon, grab a saddle and—"

"But I told you I don't know nothing about nags! Ain't never been closer to one than the betting ring at Bay Meadows!"

"What of it? Our chances on horseback are better than on any freight, with every yard bull along the line on the lookout for us!"

"Okay, okay," grumbled Soupbone, shouldering one of the saddles. Louie got the other and they rushed for the horses, dimly silhouetted nearby.

Precisely at that fateful moment, the sheriff reached the stretch of road that crossed the creek flat close to the camp. Seldom in the annals of crime had the long arm of coincidence outreached a limb of the law, as now. Sheriff Hornbeck might have draggle-tailed past, as he had in the afternoon, except for the fact that the cool, evening air carried the lingering, telltale smell of ham and beans. Being hollow and famished himself, the sheriff sniffed, reined up and blinked around.

Across the flat the campfire embers blinked back at him.

He peered and saw the vague, hurried movement of two men.

That was enough. Reining around towards them and hauling out his shooting iron, Sheriff Hornbeck made for them.

Some of his hair-trigger tenseness must have imparted itself to the animal under him, mysterious communication that often occurs between horse and rider. With ears up and nostrils flared, his mount sidled and pranced and snorted, thus making no secret of his approach. The two men by the picketed horses became a blur of movement.

The sheriff whooped:

"Hands up, the two of you, or I'll drill you like a woodpecker!"

The wanted pair had just unpicketed the cheese-colored roan and the bay-sorrel, and with unaccustomed hands were awkwardly attempting to saddle them. At the command, Loophole Louie ripped out an oath, dropped the saddle and bellied onto the roan. Soupbone Sam did likewise, lopping himself across the back of Swap's horse. They lashed them into a thumping run, barebacked and unbridled.

But even a stranger thing happened in that confused interval. At the sheriff's whooped threat, Whopper tried with galvanic obedience to project his hands above his head. It was a violent, terrified effort, for he was wholly unaware of the identity of this third intruder. The "hands up" demand seemed directed at him and Swap.

It transpired that the fugitive convicts were not experts at a rush job of knot-tying. Whopper's convulsive jerk loosened the rope. A few frantic wiggles, then he and Swap were free.

With their unexpected, unplanned liberation, as the rope dropped around their shins, both of them acted in swift unison. They started a bolt for the nearest patch of underbrush—just as the sheriff rode past the alder on his nervous horse.

Whopper tripped on the rope and flapped down full-length with a cry like that of a scared crow.

It was all too much for the sheriff's horse. It spun, sunfished and bucked. Two hundred pounds of the law's might and majesty became air-borne in vertical flight from his leather rocket platform.

SHERIFF HORNBECK came down head-first into a blackened pot, his descent cushioned by a squashy leftover of ham and beans.

In such frantic confusion, Swap was capable of heroic daring, of boldness and aggression at strange contrast with his usual meek timidity. As the sheriff spluttered and pawed the pot off his head, the little pardner scuttled into the open, snatched the almost-empty grubsack that hung loosely from a low branch, and in one swift, sure movement socked it down over the sheriff's bare, beany head.

He jerked it down good, pinioning the sheriff's arms to his sides and jabbered:

"Quick, Whopper, the rope! The rope!"

Whopper, in untangling himself, had the lariat pretty well in hand. He flung it. In almost no time, Swap had it wound tightly around Sheriff Hornbeck's heaving mid-section.

Whopper cautiously ventured close and gawped.

"G-goshlemity!" he gabbled. "W-we got one of 'em, d-didn't we?"

"Wh-what'll we do with him?" asked Swap, weak and shaky now that his nervy exploit was accomplished.

"March him in tuh town, o' course!" prattled Whopper, fishing out his slab of plugcut with a hand so unsteady that he had trouble in finding his mouth with it. "Lug him in to the lock-up, where he belongs!"

"Come on, then!" chittered Swap, prodding his captive to his feet. "The quicker we do it, the sooner them other two crooks that stole our horses can be run down!"

## CHAPTER III

### *In the Headlines*

SHERIFF HORNBECK, as he was hustled into Beaver Bend with frequent jabs in the ribs with his own shooting-iron, made explosive efforts to make himself known. But those efforts were muffled and choked by the grubsack and the smear of beans.

On reaching town, Swap and Whopper were glad to see a light in the window of *The Weekly Roundup* office, where Editor Snodgrass was putting tomorrow's issue to bed.

"Our friend, the newspaper hombre, he'll be plumb flabbergasted the way we delivered the goods!" gloated Whopper.

"Yessir, he sure will," panted Swap.

H. Greeley Snodgrass was wearing a green eyeshade when they burst into the editorial sanctum. His brow, crinkled with astonishment, slid it up on his bald-

ing brow as he stared.

"What in Tophet have you boys pulled off?" he exclaimed.

Whopper primed himself with a fresh chew.

"Bagged us a crook," he announced nonchalantly, poking out his chest. "Busted up a gang of rustlers, that's all."

"That ain't quite all," piped up Swap. "Two others escaped with our horses. We'd better report sudden, so your sheriff, whoever he is, can take after 'em."

"Better tell him he's up ag'in mighty desperate characters," declared Whopper. "I tell you, Mr. Saltgrass, they gave us the toughest tussle we've had in quite a spell."

"What's needed," Swap said, "is a posse, a big one."

"With us in charge," added Whopper. "That is, if we had our own horses, Mr. Grass Sod."

"You boys have done enough," praised the *Roundup* editor. "You've not only produced the goods but you delivered it in a neat package. Peel him. Let's see what a lowdown horse thief looks like. And the name happens to be Snodgrass."

Mention of the name fused off another explosion inside the grubsack.

"Go ahead and unwrap the big crook, Swap," directed Whopper.

Gingerly, Swap plucked away the rope and hoisted the grubsack that hid Sheriff Hornbeck's identity and the badge on his heaving bosom. The unveiling sent something clattering to the floor. It was Editor Snodgrass' pipe. Pop-eyed and with sagging jaw, he staggered back to his chair and grasped it for support.

"Sweet shades of aspirin!" he gasped incredulously. "Of all people! You! Old Do-Nothing himself!"

Sheriff Hornbeck's broad countenance, under the smear of beans, had the robust glow of a turkey gobbler's.

"So you was behind this, Snake-in-the-Grass!" he bellowed, lurching his menacing bulk at the editor.

Snodgrass dodged behind his chair. Whopper dodged behind Snodgrass. Swap scuttled behind Whopper, forking out the captured shooting-iron.

"Stop in your tracks, you big tub!" he warned shrilly. "Else I'll make you leak grease!"

Sheriff Hornbeck subsided, heavy fists unknotting and dropping to his sides. A wobbly gun, he knew, went off easy.

"I see through this whole danged plot!" he wailed. "It's a plot, a dirty frameup, a put-up job!"

Editor Snodgrass leered wickedly.

"It's a Page One story," he crooned. "You made the headlines. I'm giving you free campaign space. By this time tomorrow, everybody in the Beaver Bend country'll know that a public official is a public enemy, in cahoots with rustlers. Boy oh boy, what a come-down!"

In helpless, stricken despair, Sheriff Hornbeck lurched back against the wall and swabbed his smudged face with a red bandanna.

"I'll sue you for libel," he bleated weakly. "And I'll pinch your hired thugs for interferin' with a officer doing his duty. I'll make you eat your lousy newspaper, confound you!"

"You'll be too busy on the rockpile to do that," chortled Editor Snodgrass. "You're done with politics, Sheriff."

SWAP'S gun hand wilted as the truth dawned. Whopper gulped and his last cud of plugcut stuck in his craw.

"G-goshlemity!" he gurgled. "You hear that, pardner? W-we pinched the—the sheriff!"

"Wh-what'll we do now?" bleated Swap, looking to Editor Snodgrass for guidance.

"Lock him up!"

"Nobody's going to lock me up!" vowed the sheriff.

"Take my advice," said Editor Snodgrass. "Lock yourself up in your own jail and swallow the key. When folks read tomorrow's *Roundup*, they'll be in a lynching mood."

Sheriff Hornbeck groaned dully. The advice was sound, he realized. A flare-up of public opinion could lead to ugly extremes. Beaver Bend ranchers were an impulsive lot and wouldn't hesitate to take the law into their own hands.

"Just wait'll they find out what really happened, then the rope'll be around your neck, Snake-in-the-Grass," he promised grimly. "Come on, then, let's go and have done with it."

They left the *Roundup* office, all of them, heading for the jail which was around the corner from Herb Waller's store. The sheriff entered first, pausing to light a wall lamp, then marched in martyred dignity along the corridor to the single, barred cell. With Swap, Whopper and Editor Snodgrass knotted at his back, watching triumphantly, he fetched out a key, unlocked and swung open the cell door.

By this time, an idea that had been growing in his mind took definite shape and form. He stepped back as the door swung. Then, with deceptive quickness, he rushed his three captors, gave a powerful shove and in a twinkling they were flung inside the cage. The steel door banged shut and the lock snapped shut.

"There now!" he crowed loudly, pocketing the key. "I bet that'll hold the pack of you for a spell! As for you, Snake-in-the-Grass, it'll be a good, long time before you get a chance to spread lies about me in your blaggardin' newspaper!"

He turned his broad back on their sputtering protests, blew out the light, went around to his boarding house and found nothing left to eat at this late hour except beans. He decided he wasn't hungry, after all, swigged down some cold coffee, then proceeded to the livery barn and corral. As he expected, he found his horse waiting meekly at the corral gate.

He remounted, heeled it into a lope and tootled back to the creek flat to take up the cold trail of the suspects who had slipped through his fingers.

The interlude since his humiliating departure from there had not provided Loophole Louie and Sam Soupbone with much satisfactory progress in their getaway.

The cheese-colored roan and the bay-sorrel had that sixth sense that tells horses when they are in the hands of inexperienced riders. With no bits in their mouths, and only halter rings to guide and control them, they took unaccustomed liberties.

At the upper end of the flat, both horses veered for the brushy creek. Brush and low branches lashed at the men on their bare backs. Through it they went, with a plunging descent into the small stream.

It would have been a feat even for trained horsemen to stick in that kind of going.

LOUIE and Sam came unglued at the same time. They hit the cold creek with sprawling splashes, floundered wildly to the bank and hauled themselves out, drenched and half-stunned.

"Huh, that was a swell idea you had, Louie!" sputtered Sam.

"Well, we got away, didn't we, pal?" breathed the other.

"Says you. Gimme me a freight train, every time!"

"There ain't nothin' holdin' us."

"Not if we're still able to hoof it," grunted Soupbone Sam, rising lamely to his feet. "Let's get out of here fast."

"I'd like to know what broke loose back there," said Louie. "Whatever it was, it's over now."

They both listened. They heard nothing but night sounds—crickets, frogs and the gentle voice of the creek. Sam was shivering until his teeth chattered.

"Come on, let's make for the tracks," he urged.

"Get ahold of yourself, pal. We got to eat, don't we?"

"I don't see no chow joint around here!"

"Them bums, they've skipped. They'd never figure on us doublin' back for them beans."

Soupbone Sam was reminded of his gnawing emptiness.

"It's takin' a big chance," he faltered.

"We've took bigger ones, pal. How about it?"

"Okay, okay. Let's get it over with, then."

They maneuvered warily, pausing often to listen, inched closer and closer to Swap and Whopper's campspot. Finally, making sure that it was deserted, they slith-

ered out of cover and made for it.

The food situation was a disappointment. Nothing but scrapings were left in the overturned pot. They fingered out what morsels they could, and were at it when they heard the distant whistle of the night freight.

"Hey, let's git a move on!" gusted Soupbone Sam.

They beelined toward the siding where the water tower stood, a half-mile beyond the road. Abandoning caution in their haste, they took to the open.

They reached the road and were crossing it, with water squishing in their shoes, when a horse and rider bulked suddenly, almost upon them, coming from the direction of town.

"This time I got you!" blared Sheriff Hornbeck. "Don't budge! This is the law a-talkin'!"

He slapped a hand to his holster. Dismay and consternation sent a ripple of gooseflesh along his back.

In all the excitement of his coup back at the jail, he had clean forgotten that Swap had his shooting-iron!

## CHAPTER IV

### *The Political Pot*

IN THE tiny, crowded jail cell Swap, Whopper and Editor Snodgrass huddled in the dark. So swiftly had the tables been turned on them that it was some time before the full significance of their unpleasant plight soaked in.

"Goshlemity, how long do you reckon the sheriff aims to keep us cooped up here?" wheezed Whopper.

"Until the election is over," Snodgrass fumed.

"Just when," inquired Swap, "is election day, anyhow?"

"Two weeks off!" ranted the molder of Beaver Bend public opinion. "And if I don't get the paper out, his reelection is a cinch! All the hooraw I can make won't do any good then!"

Whopper eased himself into the one, narrow bunk. "That ain't all," he sighed. "He's packin' a grudge and might even forget to feed us."

"Better get yore imagination to work on some way to get out of here, Whopper Whaley," Swap said.

"Takes more than imagination to bust open a jail door, pardner. If we only had some tool, now . . ."

"Yeah. I'd sure trade this here six-gun for a file or a crowbar right now."

Editor Snodgrass gave an excited yelp.

"The gun! You've still got it? Here, hand it to me!"

"Now hold on!" objected Swap. "We don't hanker to get mixed up in no shootin' affair!"

"Quick, give me that gun!"

Editor Snodgrass, groping in the dark, laid hold of the sheriff's revolver and pulled it out of Swap's hand.

"What are you aimin' to do with it?" Swap protested nervously.

"I'm aiming it at this old-fashioned lock!" cried the editor. "Now stand back, out of the way!"

The revolver blasted deafeningly. Splintered lead spattered the walls. Whopper, crouched face down in the bunk, gave a sharp yowl as sharp particles of lead penetrated the thin seat of his levis.

Ignoring that, Snodgrass fired again. He gave the door a savage shake and it rattled loosely. A third thunderous report and it creaked open at his yank.

"It worked, boys! We're free! Before this night is over, the *Roundup* press will be rolling! I'll settle Do-Nothing's hash!"

They bustled into the corridor, out into the quiet street and dashed to the newspaper office. At the doorway, Swap and Whopper balked.

"Now if the sheriff comes hunting trouble, the three of us can handle him!" babbled Snodgrass, trying to herd them inside.

"No thanks, friend," Whopper declared firmly, shying away. "We'd just as soon retire from politics, right now."

"Besides which," Swap put in, "we got to do something about gettin' our horses back."

"I'll rouse up sentiment so that grateful citizens will go over the county with a fine tooth comb," promised Snodgrass. "Don't worry about those horses."

With this airy assurance, Snodgrass dived for his sanctum, eager to write up his sensational exposure of Sheriff Hornbeck. But Swap halted him with a restraining clutch.

"You got more faith in the local population than we've got, mister. If we locate them horse thieves, they might need some persuading. How about giving back that persuader?"

Editor Snodgrass let him have the six-gun. His favorite weapon was the old typewriter and he rushed to it, slipped in a sheet of copy paper and the keys started to rattle.

BEWILDERED and worn by the uneven flow of events, the pardners set off forlornly along the creek road. Swap tucked the gun inside his belt and reflected dolefully:

"How is it we're always getting tangled up in messes like this, anyhow?"

"Hard to say," shrugged Whopper. "But we sure did get prominent around here in a hurry, didn't we?"

"Yeah. Pinching a sheriff is apt to stir up things almost anywhere. Wonder what he's up to now?"

"Lightin' out for far parts. If he's such a big crook as he seemed to be."

"I been a-wonderin' about that. If he was in cahoots with the cusses that lit into us, then why didn't they come to his rescue?"

"Hm-mm. That's right. Mebbe we did act a mite impulsive."

"Yessir. I sort of wish we'd gentled him more, just to be on the safe side."

Such misgivings didn't make either of them any happier. They trudged along in gloomy silence, until the whistle of the night freight interrupted it.

"Anyhow, we still got our soogans there in camp," Whopper decided. "A good night's snooze, it'll make things look brighter."

"Mebbe," Swap said doubtfully.

This small, comforting assurance was not theirs for long. The fate that had dumped them into the political pot of Beaver Bend had more hot water ready, in the shape of an encounter with the one person they preferred least of all to meet up with again.

They froze to a shocked halt as the loud voice of Sheriff Hornbeck came from the dim stretch of road ahead.

"This time I got you! Don't budge! This is the law a-talkin'!"

Then came a brief, suspenseful pause that pounded at the pardners' nerves. Then a whining response:

"Wh-what's the big idea, Copper? We're just a couple of stiffs on the move! We ain't done nothing!"

Swap poked Whopper in the ribs.

"You hear that? You recognize that voice?"

"Goshlemity, I sure do!" shuddered Whopper. "It—it's the feller who slugged me!"

"Yessir, one of the sidewinders who stole our horses!"

"And—and it don't sound like him and the sheriff is in cahoots now!"

Sheriff Hornback's voice had lost some of its volume and sureness when he spoke again:

"On the move, huh? Then move up here, where I can get a good look at you! Hands up and no monkey bizness, savvy?"

Loophole Louie and Soupbone Sam advanced reluctantly.

"I tell you, we're just bummin' through!" protested Louie. "Ain't no law ag'in that, is there?"

His short, stocky figure and his companion's slouching height loomed near. They met with the descriptions of the fugitives. Alone and unarmed, he was face to face with a pair of desperate criminals. Nothing to do but try to bluff it through.

"Up along the road with you," he ordered gruffly. "And stick together, close!"

He reined his horse around as they started past. The rumble of the approaching freight filled the air. Just as they were abreast of him, a long, searching headlight shone on the sheriff.

THERE he sat, like an owl on a stump, empty-handed except for the reins he clutched. Loophole Louie darted a shifty glance at him, noting even the empty holster.

"Hey, Sam!" he snapped. "The old goat ain't heeled! Take off!"

They leaped from the road, in the direction of the siding. Again had arrived a moment when Swap acted with lightning presence of mind. He hauled away at the shooting-iron tucked inside his waistband. The hammer caught. There came a flaming blast that snipped off levi buttons he would have chosen the least to lose.

The accidental shot was harder on Swap's nerves than anybody's else. As the slug lifted a puff of road dust at his feet, he uttered a startled yell and leaped in the air.

That leap did it. His buttonless pants slid down to his shins.

The gunshot and that yell stopped the fleeing felons in their tracks. Loophole Louie sang out:

"Hey, don't shoot, don't shoot! We give up!"

It still wasn't clear to the befuddled sheriff just what was going on. He had his hands full with his prancing horse. Swap scooped up his fallen pants. Then he toddled past the sheriff and herded his captives back onto the road.

"So! You're the crooks who stole our horses, huh?" he crackled. "What have you done with 'em? Where are they?"

"Horse, horses!" groaned Soupbone Sam. "To heck with all horses! They're bad luck!"

"Talk up, or your luck'll get a heap worse—sudden!"

"Hey, hey, take it easy!" begged Louie, staring into the snout of the shooting iron. "Them nags are okay! We left 'em just up the creek a little ways!"

"G-goshlemity, that's fine!" came Whopper's froggish croak from a clump of weeds by the roadside, where he had plunged when the gun went off. "Such bein' the case, I'll just go and round 'em up pronto!"

Away he went, his long legs taking him out of sight in about three jumps.

Swap fought a panicky impulse to follow. But he was in too deep to back out now. Sheriff Hornbeck, having quieted his fractious mount, gathered what wits he possessed and found himself capable of speech.


IN THE NEXT ISSUE

*Did O'Mara kill the Eastern owner of the huge Bell Ranch?—a sprawling outfit ramrodded by a hardcase who wouldn't be crossed, and who used his position to pressure a group of small ranchers. . . . Against guns, threats and murder, O'Mara and his friends became a—*

**TARGET FOR THE WILD BUNCH**

*A Novel By* **JOSEPH CHADWICK**

"Glory be, if it ain't Snakey's half-pint hellaroo!" he blurted.

"Not any more I ain't," declared Swap. "Not me. Him and us, we parted company permanent."

"How'd you get out? Crawl between the bars?"

He didn't wait for an explanation.

"Anyhow, it's lucky you did get out, by golly! You know who these jiggers are?"

"Couple of horse rustlers!"

"Rustlers? That ain't half of it! They're lifers on the loose from the State pen, that's what! As soon kill a man as look at him! There's a reward out for—for 'em!"

He cut it short, wishing he hadn't mentioned it. Because he was aware of Swap's sudden, intent interest. The bargaining shrewdness that had won Swap his nickname in many a horse-trading deal gleamed now in his eyes.

"Reward, huh?" he retorted briskly. "How much, Sheriff?"

"That ain't no concern of yours, small fry!" blustered Sheriff Hornbeck. "Just hand me back my gun!"

UNDER any other circumstances, Swap would have been delighted to oblige. But now he ignored the request. He kept his aim on the fugitives.

"A reward," he mused aloud. "Dead or alive?"

"Hey, nix on that!" Loophole Louie blatted nervously. "Cut the gab, won't you? Sure there's a price on our heads! One hunnert smackers! You got us; now lug us in!"

"Yeah, some place where it's warm," chattered Soupbone Sam. "And slip us some eats!"

"A hundred bucks," reflected Swap. "That'd buy a heap of ham hocks, Sheriff."

Sheriff Hornbeck mulled over that broad hint. Money, he decided, wasn't everything. Jailing these wanted men would mean more than cash to him. It would save his reputation and his job, refuting anything that came out in *The Weekly Roundup,* and also make a monkey out of Editor Snodgrass.

He hauled out his wallet and Swap heard the pleasant rustle of greenbacks in the sheriff's fingers.

"Ain't you gettin' tired a-holdin' that big heavy shooting-iron?" he asked Swap.

"Well now, that all depends on how bad you crave to hold it," countered Swap.

"I got fifty dollars here, or close enough to it to make a fair split."

A grin of satisfaction filtered to Swap's face. He and Whopper could eat for a long time on fifty dollars.

"It's a deal," he agreed. He handed the six-gun up to the sheriff, at the same time clamping onto the money. In so doing, he had to let loose of his pants and they slid again to his ankles. But he hauled them up and crammed the money in a pocket.

"Buy ham hocks with it," grunted the sheriff, "or hollyhocks. I don't care which. But don't buy 'em in Beaver Bend, savvy? If you show up in town again, I'll—"

"Don't worry," Swap assured him. Off across the creek flat, in the gentle starlight, he made out Whopper leading the cheese-colored roan and the bay-sorrel back to their campspot. "No sir, don't fret yourself none about that. Come sun-up, me and my pardner, we'll put Beaver Bend behind us for good! So long, Sheriff."

With that, he tootled off to join Whopper. Sheriff Hornbeck, swaggering in saddle, trained his shooting-iron on Loophole Louie and Soupbone Sam.

"All right, you jailbirds!" he boomed. "March!"

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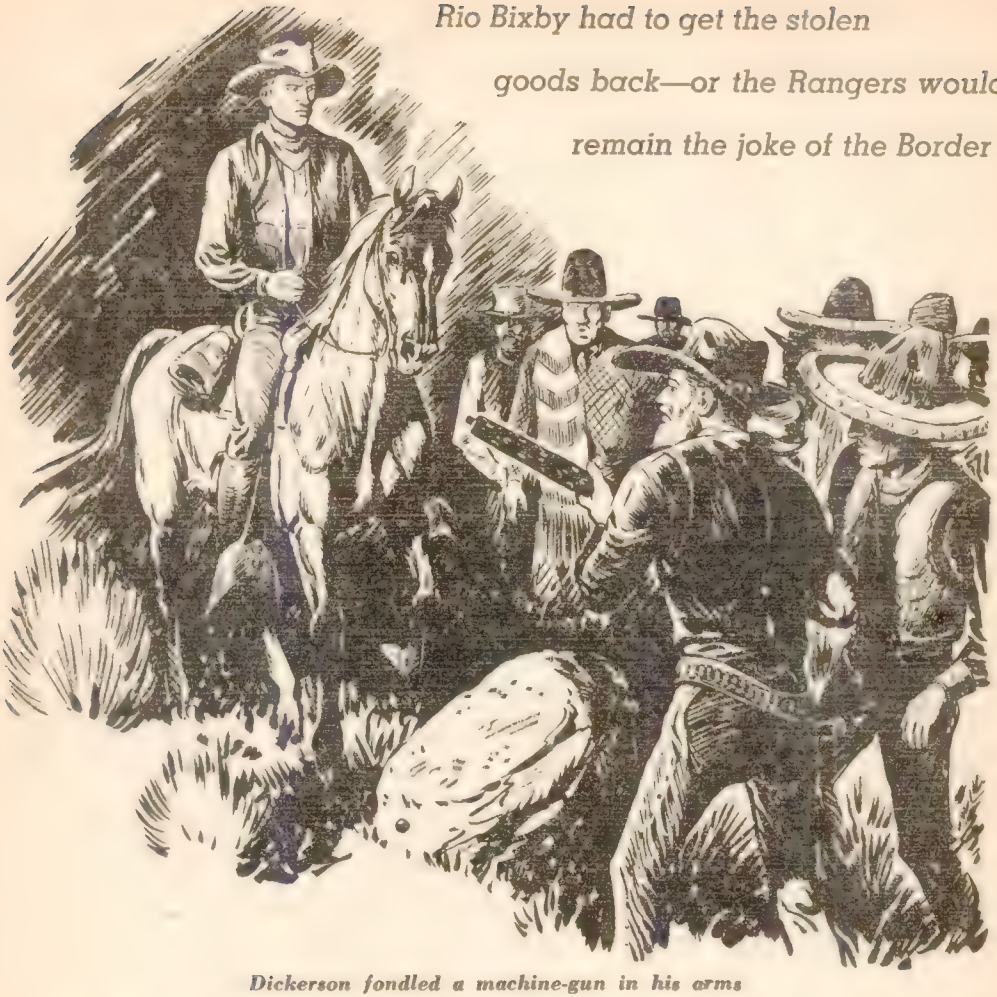
## *Answers to* HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW YOUR WEST?

*(See Page 96)*

1. Luke Short.
2. From Wales, where they had been experienced coal miners.
3. In Colorado. Cliff Palace has nearly 200 rooms.
4. William Sydney Porter, better known as O. Henry.
5. Coupons came with each package, which could be exchanged for various premiums.

*Rio Bixby had to get the stolen goods back—or the Rangers would remain the joke of the Border*



*Dickerson fondled a machine-gun in his arms*

# WET WAX

## By BARRY SCOBEE

A DOZEN Mexicans were squatting or leaning around the door of "Good-Eye" Gonzales' cantina when "Rio" Bixby rode up and stepped down, in the cool sweet hour between sundown and dark.

The eyes of some of the bean farmers and goat herders and *candelilla* wax-weed gatherers were twinkling at him in merry, derisive amusement. Other men were grinning openly, others trying to bite back their grins.

It was the old game that a Texas Ranger on the Rio Grande had to face—being laughed at, made the butt of a joke, in a half-friendly mocking way. That was something that decidedly did the officer, and the Ranger Service, no good at all.

Rio strode through the men without greeting or acknowledging their presence, though he knew them all. He'd get around to them and their grins in due time.

Right now he had a white man in mind. Officially he would have said an Anglo-American, though the Mexicans themselves used the term white man as opposed to Latin-Americans of dark skins and Spanish-Indian descent.

Then unexpectedly he saw the white man. Alonzo Dickerson as he had named himself when he'd crossed the Rio up out of Mexico a week ago. A big man. A man-and-a-half as the Mexicans said.

Dickerson was squatting against the adobe wall of the cantina, beside the open door, in half-shadow. Which was why Ranger Bixby had not seen him sooner.

"Hi?" Rio said, hard and questioning. He planted himself, looking down at the bland, bewhiskered face with the suspicion that had been born in him through the day.

Immediately a man appeared in the doorway. "You locate it?" he demanded of Rio, anxious and worried.

"Lupy did," said Rio. "It's across the river."

He saw tremendous relief loosen the tight face of Dee Smith, who operated the *candelilla* wax "factory" nearby. Forty one-hundred-pound molds of wax had been stolen from him three nights before. Though the current market price for wax was only twenty cents a pound it represented a terrific loss for Smith. The relief was so manifest in his friend that Rio felt a poignant stab of pain in himself. Then the worry was back in Smith's haggard countenance.

"Across the river," he echoed, hopeless. "It's gone forever."

"Too bad, too bad," said Alonzo Dickerson, his words dripping sympathy as he raised his huge figure to full height. "It is indeed unfortunate, Bixby, that your Ranger regulations forbid you to cross over into foreign Mexico to recover stolen property."

THAT had been Dickerson's mental stance ever since his arrival—overflowing with falsely warm-hearted, mellow, subtly mocking sympathy for the Ranger's endless troubles. So mocking with double meaning that the Mexican population, numbering ten-to-one over the Anglos, liked it. Enjoyed it because the law too often got in the way of their petty smuggling that ranged from a two-bit fur pelt or a goat kid to a "wet" mule or cow—anything being "wet" that was crossed over the Rio Grand either way illegally.

Rio turned on the man. "That's right, Dickerson, I can't go across to bring back stolen property. But you're free and footloose. You're the untied, fearless type. How about you going over in your great big-hearted way and bringing back the stuff for Dee?"

"I'd like to, I really would," Dickerson declared. "But if I failed these good American citizens"—he gestured to the men roundabout—"would laugh at me. Give me the old razz. I can't take that; I'm too delicate."

The Mexicans who understood English laughed delightedly at the man's obvious "hoorawing" of the officer. A glint of amused satisfaction played in Dickerson's tawny eyes. Angered more than he liked to be, Rio stalked past him into the cantina. At once Good-Eye Gonzales' one orb lit up.

"Ho, Rio!" he greeted. "Big Four all here now. What you know? You find wax?"

Rio stopped to scan the low-beamed room that was lighted by a hanging kerosene lamp. Dee Smith shuffled past him, a keen man gone hopeless, and took a chair at a table with Coley Conger, freighter for the community to the distant railroad, and United States Customs Inspector Joe Hartley with his long humorous mug. Those three and Rio were called the "Big Four" of this remote river settlement.

"What you want for eat, Rio?" Good-Eye sang out. "We, we got catfeesh and chili weeth."

"Red meat," said Rio. "Beefsteak big as your Sunday coat."

In a moment the proprietor set a plate of fried catfish before him. Rio regarded it dourly.

"Fish," he said, "ain't food. It won't give a man will power to control his wrought-up emotions or chew his friends and enemies."

"Him good catfeesh," Good-Eye said placatingly. "You wan' swap him back for chili weeth beans?"

"Your menu," said Rio, viciously spearing the golden-brown slab of exquisite fish, "is as limited as my ability and my legal authority. Coffee now, strong as lye."

"Comin' up! Cooked in river water with sand."

Alonzo Dickerson's big form filled the doorway and, from his words, he had heard Rio's complaints.

"Don't blame you for being upset, Bixby. These hombres smirking up their sleeves at the law. It's outrageous. Bad for law and order here on the Border. Encourages evil characters to steal and smuggle."

It was some satisfaction to Rio, writhing inside at the bland and mockish nagging, that Dee Smith, Coley Conger and Joe Hartley regarded the man with distaste.

Dickerson seated himself at an empty table. He shuffled a pack of cards and began to deal them. Five hands, five cards each. One by one he picked them up and made discards. Playing solitaire poker. His way of inducing a game. Sooner or later somebody would pick up a hand and bet. The fellow had pocketed quite a few quarters from the *pobre* bean farmers who couldn't let gambling alone.

All unexpectedly a girl appeared in the doorway, her dark hair wind-tossed. She was Dee Smith's daughter, Polly, sixteen and the oldest of the widower's four children. She came in, defiant in resentment and rebellion, dark eyes smouldering.

"The kids are fed, Mr. Smith," she said to her daddy. "If you can eat here, so can I."

Dee Smith made a small movement of futility and despair. The girl sat half-a-hip on a high-stool at the high counter.

"Make it a bowl, Good-Eye," she commanded. "On your feet!" She pivoted around. "You find our wax, Rio? Or don't I go to school?"

Four thousand pounds of wax at twenty cents a pound—not much money for a banker, Rio thought, but an awful lot for people down here.

Dee Smith had meant to use some of it to send Polly to a boarding school in San Antonio and Polly had been gay at the prospect. The poor kid, Rio's thoughts ran on, mothering three little kids, keeping the home for them and her dad. No young people, white boys or girls, her age. And she was of an age to hanker for companionship and fun.

"All righty, Rio," she went on. "The answer's in that glum mug of yours." She kicked out a sandalled foot recklessly. She snapped thumb and finger like a Spanish dancer. "Good-by, San Antonio. Good-by, clothes. Good-by, fun. What do I care! Tra-la-la! Fun's where you find it and I'm a huntress!" As Good-Eye plunked a bowl of chili down on the counter behind her, she bucked around. "Coffee, you one-eyed heathen, with grit in it!"

DEE JONES got up and shuffled out. Sneaked out, almost. His little girl was out of hand all at once and he was scared. That was his trouble as much as the loss of the wax. That was what was breaking down a usually keen man.

Rio slid an eye to Coley Conger. Coley looked beaten too. He'd had hard luck. His freight wagon had gone off a bad road, breaking his leg and dragging some of his mules to their death. He had the mules replaced now and was ready to start hauling again. He needed the work to buy food and clothes for a wife and five kids. Supplies in the settlement were getting low. He had been ready to start freighting out the accumulated forty molds of wax. But he couldn't afford to

make a ninety-mile trip to the railroad town with an empty wagon.

Even Inspector Hartley felt the gloom. Good-Eye was frying fish and whistling a doleful seesaw. Rio shifted moodily. He welcomed a sudden flurry at the door—a slim pony sliding to a stop, a young fellow vaulting from its bare back and through the doorway. Guadalupe Clarendon arriving in his usual manner. Lupy, whose papa was an Americano and his mama a Mexicana. Lithe and graceful as lacy mesquite bushes bending in a breeze. He stopped dramatically, and accusingly.

"Ha, you, Rio! At last I find you, hiding. Why don't you slip me the info when you're going to high-tail it out of town all day—Me a San Antonio college chump, me your international spy, me your horse-rustler and dishwasher, your dirty-worker, your heel-boy learning from the great Texas Ranger to be a detective on the El Paso police force some day. People were asking me all day long, 'Where's Rio?' And I don't know. I can't tell them. I am shamed. I am belittled. I am chagrined by my abysmal ignorance. I look in the houses for you, I comb the jungle. I have important information—"

"I found your note at the shack," said Rio, "saying the wax is over across."

"Yeah, found it hours late. What you eating, Rio? I'm starved from here to here."

The girl Polly, with parted lips and shining eyes, was devouring the slim youngster a half dozen years her senior. Lupy gave no indication of seeing her. He stepped to Rio's table, looked down at his plate.

"Good-Eye," he called, "duplicate this. Only make it double." Then he saw Alonzo Dickerson. "No, wait, I got a hen to set. I'll be back."

He bored down at Rio. Gave the tiniest jerk of his head toward the door. It was a hot signal to the Ranger to follow him. Then he sailed out, vaulted on to the pony. Polly slid off the high-stool as if drawn after him by invisible threads.

Rio did not move. He was watching Dickerson. The man was still dealing poker hands, studiously preoccupied. Too preoccupied. Indifferent. Suspiciously indifferent. His eyes were veiled above his silky brown beard that was parted in the middle by careful combing. A split beard.

What was going on in the fellow's mind? Rio wondered. He liked to know about strangers in his district. The man's bigness, his neatness, his smoothness, his overdone sympathy, the beard. All that had been recurring to Rio throughout the day until he had built up a half-conviction that the fox had a paw in the missing wax. That was why he had looked at the man so hard at the door. Now he got up abruptly and crossed to Dickerson's table. He straddled a chair and picked up one of the dealt hands.

"Ha!" said Split-Beard, "a sucker at last. Got openers?"

He had wheedled other men into the game in this manner—Joe Hartley, once; poor bean farmers, Good-Eye, winning their dimes and quarters. Rio fanned out his five cards, laid them face down, and dug up three silver dollars and some chickenfeed from his pants pocket, all that he had left from his last payday.

"Openers," he said, and slid a nickel to the center of the table.

The only poker the Big Four ever played was pastime penny-ante with a two-bit limit. This was nickel ante and no limit. Rio won a buck and a quarter on three aces. His take on the next hand was a dollar and six-bits. He lost his antes on the next two hands. No openers for either man in the fifth and sixth hands. Dickerson dealt and opened the seventh. Rio raised him. Dickerson called and raised. The heisting went back and forth. Coley Conger and Joe Hartley came over to watch. The few Mexicans in the room crowded around. Good-Eye too. Dickerson was the first to stop raising. He picked up the pack.

"Cards," he said.

"Standing pat," said Rio.

DICKERSON dealt himself one card. He looked at it warily—bet a dollar. Rio called and raised. Presently Rio had two dollars left, Dickerson three.

Making as if he had his opponent out on a limb Rio shoved in his two cartwheels with a grin. The big man eyed him. Then something caved in the man's greenish eyes.

"You win," he said, and started to pull two cards out of his five. "My openers."

Good-Eye inadvertently, oh so inadvertently, joggled the man next to him. And the man, likewise so inadvertently, bumped Dickerson's elbow. Dickerson's five cards were knocked to the table, face up. Two aces and three fives. A full house. A high hand to win with. Rio gently laid his cards down face up. Not even a pair. Nothing. In the startled silence he raked in the pot. Then Dickerson was speaking, making his voice jovial.

"Nice, Bixby. A neat little bluff. But it gets you out on a limb."

"How's that?" Rio wanted to know.

"It makes me mad." The man laughed lightly, to show he was joking. "Now if you should induce yourself to cross over to rescue that stolen wax—and I think you are trying to tune up to doing just that—I'll inform on you to the Ranger Service. That's what a fury I'm in for that bluff." He smiled merrily.

"Hop to it," said Rio and left the room and went to his gray horse.

Well, he had learned something. Two things. Three. Dickerson, the plausible mocker, could be bluffed. He was short on money or he wouldn't have laid down a full house. And he was afraid Rio might cross the river to see about the wax. He did not want that. He sure didn't.

Rio felt satisfied. His job now was to get into contact with Guadalupe Clarendon and find out what the kid had on his mind. As likely a place as any would be the wax plant. That was where the two tons of candelilla had been stolen, that was where Dee Smith probably had gone. Lupy might be conferring with him.

Rio by-passed the factory clearing. No good riding in on him if he was actually "setting a hen." He approached the working place from the down-river side. He left the gray horse in the darkness of the mesquite brush and went on foot the few

[*Turn page*]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yards to the clearing's edge. The gurgling Rio Grande over the rocky ford, the soft swish of the mesquite fronds in the night wind, the huffing fires at the boiling vats, covered any sounds he might be making.

It was a familiar sight to the Ranger's eyes. A shed, thatched with sun-dried weed waste, its only use being to give the workmen a shady spot from the broiling sun of daytime. Just beyond the shed were the three furnaces and vats. Fires were going under all three of the six-feet-long pans, or *pailas* as the Mexicans called them. Fires of boiled-out, sun-dried weed-waste. One of the Mexican workers came out into the darkness and took up at pitchforkful of the pencil-like rubbery weed and carried it to a vat.

The unmistakable, beat-out figure of Dee Smith stood under the shed, beside a big steel drum of sulphuric acid. Rio went nearer. Lupy apparently wasn't around. Smith, in silhouette against the bright fire-glow, took up a glass beer stein by its handle, rolled the drum slightly on its platform, filled the stein with acid, carried it to a *paila* and dashed the fluid over the boiling weed-mass—acid that would help the cooking process to break down the weed fiber and release the two percent of wax substance. Not until Smith set the stein back on the drum did Rio speak.

"Lupy been around, Dee?"

Smith gave a start. "Blast it, Rio, can't you come up without pussyfooting? No, I haven't seen Lupy."

"Thought maybe he'd be here." Rio started to lean a hand on the steel drum.

"Watch out!" Smith warned. "Confound it, Rio, you know better than to touch that drum, where maybe a few drops of acid might be spilt. You'll get a mitt burned off some day, doing that."

"Yeah, I forget about the stuff," said Rio. "You've warned me enough. I wonder sometimes why nobody ever takes a drink of the stuff, that glass setting there handy. Dee, what do you know about the man-and-a-half, Dickerson?"

"What should I know? I'm not a cop. He's been around here a couple of times asking dumb questions. Like the city dame askin' the cowboy at the big round-up how in the world they ever got all the cows milked. Rio, what under the sun can I do about getting that wax back? It may be a hundred miles from here by now. Seems like I've gone plumb useless, worrying about it and Polly. Hey, there he comes now.

SOME distance beyond the fires the shape of the huge split-whiskered man was emerging from the mesquite growth, at a slow, watchful stroll.

"I'm not here," Rio whispered, and backed off in shadows to squat behind an empty acid drum and the diminishing stockpile of fresh snaky weed.

Dickerson came on, pausing now and then to gawk like any green onlooker. One of the Mexican hands took up a common hand washbasin attached to a long wooden handle and began to skim a vat, pouring the boiling fluid into a No. 3 galvanized washtub. Dickerson edged up to the shed. He kicked a mold of the yellowish wax the size of a tub that had cooled and been dumped out on the ground.

"How much does it weigh?" he asked.

"About a hundred pounds," Smith said shortly.

"Enough to polish all the boots in Texas, all the floors in Arkansaw, and all the pianos in Chi, when mixed with other essentials." Dickerson chuckled at his wit. "Is that all you have boiled out in three days, since the other was stolen?"

"Uh-huh," Smith grunted. "Cooking out the weed comes slow."

"Kind of slow for the weed gatherers too, isn't it—the hombres packing the stuff in on their burros?" Dickerson stepped carefully around the acid drum. "Me, I give that devil's brew a wide berth. By the way, Smith, how much does a drum of *that* punch the scales?"

"Hundred-and-ten-gallon drum weights right at two thousand pounds—sulphuric is heavy. You thinking about packing a drum off?"

Dickerson laughed oddly. It even seemed to Rio that he eyed the drum greedily. The man must really be in need

of money.

Dickerson drifted away. Rio straightened, shaking the kinks out of his knees. A low, familiar whistle came from the landward side of the clearing. Lupy was there, furtively, on his bareback pony. Rio went to him.

"Rover boy, Artful Dodger," said Lupy accusingly, "I've been looking everywhere for you, again."

"Lupy, have you seen Polly? I don't know when she left Good-Eye's." Rio was worried. "Lupy, why don't you date her for Saturday night's *baile?* She'd probably like to dance. She's lonesome."

Lupy protested. "She's just a kid."

"And you're an old gentleman of twenty-two."

"She's full white," said Lupy in a that-ends-it tone. "Listen, Rio; Dee's wax is in grabbing distance—a quarter mile, straight over there."

"You see it?" Rio was doubtful. "Why would the thief leave it so close?"

"The labor question. Weight. Transportation. Yeah, I saw it. It's hidden in that thicket just this side of the old tumbledown wax factory over there. Guess he thought nobody would think of looking that close. He's got wagons ready now; going to haul it off tonight. Take it through the desert and cross it back somewhere below."

"He who?"

"Rio, you remember that piece in *The El Paso Herald* about the salted machineguns? Gosh, don't you read? Americano stole six Maxims and some Springfield rifles from that cavalry troop, 'way down below here, and peddled them in Mexico. Left the boys so empty-handed three of our soldiers were killed in a raid by *bandidos*. The Americano put salt in the gun-barrels and ruined 'em. Remember? So he could sell some more. The Mexicans caught onto it. The feller had to hide out, fast. The paper said his name was Adair Dolphus—kind of sweet and poetic for a big guy."

"Adair Dolphus," Rio echoed wonderingly. "Alonzo Dickerson, same initials. You know what you're talking about?"

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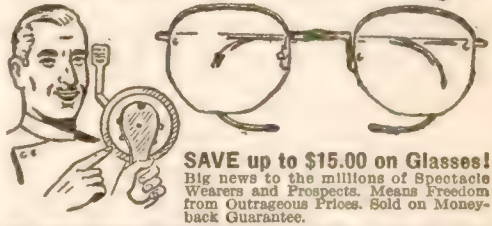

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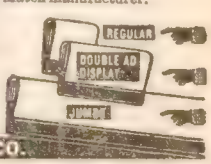


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"Ha-ha, I thought you'd catch holt after while. Me, Guadalupe Clarendon, your famous international spy, I got contacts over across. Stoolies. They put me wise."

Rio knew from experience that his volunteer helper was dependable—a kid who was taking to trailing and tailing and "detective" work like a crow to a cornfield. Rio's gaze roamed over the clearing, past the fires, on to the river shore, to the darkness that was a black wall. Alonzo Dickerson of the split beard had vanished. Rio began to talk.

"Lupy, Dee's wax is our first consideration. So Polly can go away to school. So Coley can get to freighting again. Locate Dickerson. Be a horse-fly on him. I'll round up men and go bring back the wax."

"No, Rio!" Lupy said sharply. "You'll get fired for crossing the river."

"Never mind that, Lupy. Find Dickerson. Tail him. Use your head."

RIO set off to get his hidden horse. Lupy called after him. "They're ready to pull out with that wax, over there." Back in the saddle, Rio headed for Good-Eye's cantina. Half way to the place he heard in the darkness, over the noisy bending of the mesquite brush in the wind, the laughter of a girl and the heavier voice of a man in a word or two. Rio was off his horse quickly.

"Polly!" he said. "What are you doing here?"

"Rio!" she cried, and she was a darker part of the night running toward him. "Don't interfere, Rio!"

Rio heard a heavier step, a wordless, threatening grunt. He drew his revolver from its holster. Then the girl was wrapping her arms around his arm, hands fumbling for the gun. Rio bent forward to loosen her. In that position he felt a blow on the back of his neck, as if the edge of a hand had chopped him. It was repeated and he went to his knees, dizzy and stunned.

When Rio stumbled to his feet only his horse was there, shifting uneasily. He scraped a match and in its brief windy life he found his gun. He mounted and

rode on. No use to hunt for the girl in this wind-tossed brush; the thing to do was to gather help.

The Mexicans were still loafing around the cantina. Rio pulled up his horse in the yellow light from the wide doorway. The men, sensing that something was up, gathered around him with upturned faces.

"Men," he said, "Dee's wax is over there a little way. I want you to cross the river with me and help bring it back."

Astonished, staring silence greeted this. Then someone laughed. The law in a jam! The law asking *them* to help it! The law that the big white man had been making sport of. Rio saw grins appear on the faces. The echo of their amusement over the big man's mockery was still in them. Besides, this was a matter between white men. And what a joke to tell up and down the river. All at once the men were backing away. Then they were gone like a flight of blackbirds.

Good-Eye appeared in the doorway. His eyes and Rio's met and held. From the night laughter came floating back.

"Good-Eye," said Rio, "I've got to get the Ranger Service respected again."

"She got the black eye now," said the Mexican sadly.

Rio rode past Coley Conger's. "Get to the ford," he called. He hurried on to summon Dee Smith. "We've got to get over there and get your wax," he said curtly. Dee brought his two Mexican workers. Coley Conger appeared on one of his work mules. Rio tossed his belt and gun into a bush. He never crossed the river with firearms. He wished Joe Hartley was with them, but remembered that the Federal man couldn't and wouldn't cross into Mexico.

"I don't know what the situation is over there," he told the four. "There may be danger—certain to be. If you want to back out now's the time." All four laughed harshly, waded into the ford.

"All I know," said Rio, "is that wagons are loaded and ready to go. And that Polly may be over there."

"Polly?" Dee Smith's cry was filled with anguish. He seized a saddle leather.

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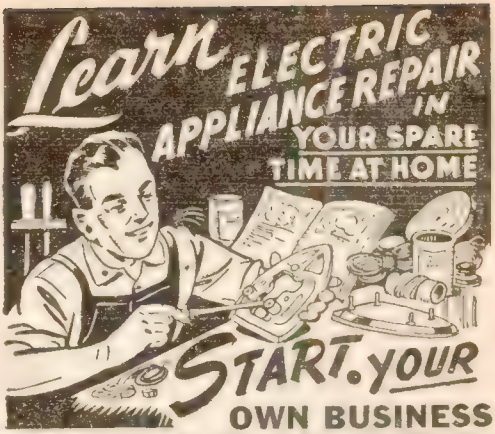


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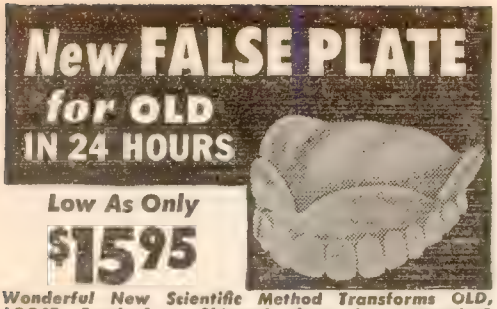


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"Trot!" he told Rio. "Lope! I'll keep up."

His two Mexicans got on either side of Coley Conger's mule and gripped straps. They became an army of five on the run, forward.

As they approached the thicket that Lupy had mentioned they saw two lanterns moving about. They slowed down to a cautious walk, watching ahead. Then against the lights a figure appeared. A girl. Dee Smith said "Polly!" breathlessly and he and Rio hurried on. They saw the vague shape of the girl dart to one side of the rough unfenced road and disappear against the brush. "Polly!" Rio called softly, and got off his horse.

"*Ssst!*" came a warning hiss from her. "They'll hear you." Then she was at Rio, her hands on his arm. "Oh Rio, Rio, I'm sorry he hit you. I had to stop your gun. I knew when you bluffed him in the poker game that he had our wax. Hé—I had to find it. I knew—"

"Woman's intuition," said a voice close at them, and Lupy was there. "Listen, Rio, four wagons with burros hitch to 'em and ready to roll. And only two men. All they've got is knives. Big Man and two of his Mexicos have gone to the town to steal guns from the Rurale soldiers' headquarters—old Sergeant Melon and his men are up the river—"

"I know that," said Rio. "It's why the wax hasn't been found and brought back. You take Polly home, Lupy."

"Ha," said Lupy. And to the girl: "Home for yours, kid. Scoot! Rest of you come on. We'll grab the two Mexicos with the lanterns."

BUT they didn't grab them. When the two "Mexicos" saw six Gringoes easing up on them they slung their lanterns and ducked for the brush.

There were two other lighted lanterns. Using them, Rio and Smith made certain the wax was all in the wagons. Then Smith driving one, Coley Conger another, and the two Mexican wax hands piloting the other two, with ten burros to every wagon, they set out. Rio had Lupy ride ahead with a lantern as guide and he rode behind the parade as rear guard.

From the hard knocks of his experience, it all looked too easy to Rio. A hitch was bound to develop. As the wagons approached the river ford the first one stopped, then the others. A sudden blaze sprang up. Rio rode forward hard to see what it meant. He saw people there, Mexicans, Americans, men, women and kids—everybody in the settlement, it appeared. And Polly was stoking the fire with dry *candelilla* weed brought over by the people in armloads.

Rio rode square into Alonzo Dickerson and four cutthroat Mexicans lined up with him. Dickerson fondled a machine-gun in his arms as lightly as a rifle.

"Well-well-well, Ranger!" the big man boomed. "I catch you away from home without your warpaint." He repeated it in Spanish for the benefit of the Mexicans, and also: "Rangers also can squirm!"

Wrath was smouldering in Dickerson's eyes. A fury was building up, stoked by years of law-hate, Rio guessed. But the man had been bluffed once—if only there was a way now! Suddenly the man smacked the metal of the Maxim down across his great palm.

"Get out of Mexico, Bixby! You meddling law! You laughing-stock. I'd almost as soon make a collander out of you as keep this wax, much as I need money. Get! Go home!"

Nobody moved. Dickerson's huge body crouched slightly. Then Rio remembered something. The piece in the paper Lupy had mentioned. The news story had said that Dickerson bore a scar on his chin. That beard was to conceal his identity as Adair Dolphus, of course. But the split in it was caused by the scar. A scar left by a Ranger's bullet.

The machine-gun was bearing straight at Rio. The man's big right hand was at the butt, at the trigger. Rio heeled his gray horse gently into the rippling water, and his friends watched him go.

The gray splashing through the water, a thirst assailed Rio such as he had never felt before. It burned his tongue, his throat. On the Texas sand he remembered his revolver where he had tossed it into a

[*Turn page*]


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bush. But that wouldn't help. What he needed to get the people back on his side—back with the law, respecting again the Ranger Service—was to outwit the fellow, turn the laugh, give the Mexicans the kind of huge joke they so much loved.

He saw the beer stein on the drum of sulphuric acid. He stared at it, took it up by the handle, rolled the drum a little on its platform, bent to the faucet. . . .

Rio, back at the water, saw that nobody for the moment was observing him. The crowd was too occupied in watching Dee Smith turn the wagon around, under the threat of the machine-gun in Dickerson's elbow. Before the ten burros could do much sidewise stepping in the turn the people shifted in surprise at the sight of Rio coming back up out of the water, the stein held carefully in his hand. Not a person there hardly but knew what the stein was used for. Dickerson pivoted around to see, and froze, he was not a broom's length from the Ranger.

"Drop that thing, Dolphus," Rio said, "or I'll splash this stuff on you."

Dickerson's huge muscles bulged. The heavy gun hurtled at Rio. Rio ducked and let it go over his head. Before the big man could move, Rio was at him, arm drawn back to fling the stein's contents. Dickerson's hands went up, head high.

"Don't," he pleaded.

"Go ahead of me across the river," Rio ordered.

Dickerson—Adair Dolphus of the poetic name—went. The people swarmed after them, lit by the flickering fire. On the Texas side Rio bent and took up his belt and gun with his left hand.

"You arrest me for stealing that wax," Dickerson threatened, "and I'll see that you're kicked out of the Rangers for crossing the river to recover stolen property."

"I'm not worrying about that," said Rio. "The wax will soon be back and Joe Hartley will check it to see no customs rules are being violated. Then"—he glanced at the shining-eyed Polly—"our little girl can go off to her school. What I am arresting you for, Dolphus, is the theft of six machine-guns and some

hand rifles from that cavalry troop, that brought the death of three soldiers." Then Rio raised the stein and said: "Here's looking at you."

He gulped the contents. The crowd gasped. Polly wailed. Rio bent and scooped up another steinful from the river and drank again.

Somebody shouted in mighty relief, "It was water!" Then the twenty-five or thirty Mexicans, who loved a joke, began to laugh. And the laughter rose to a gale and broke into wild guffaws.

Rio had given them a big joke to tell up and down the river.

## CANNIBAL OF THE ROCKIES

*(Continued from page 6)*

Ouray's advice, secured supplies at the cow camp and there separated, these men making their way to Saguache, the central point for that section of southern Colorado, while the rest went to other settlements. He repeated his story to them—that Swan and the others had gone on to the Silverton country.

Packer spent his time drinking and playing poker, and finally made a deal for a seventy-dollar horse, with Otto Mears, one of the most respected men in that territory and an owner of the Gotthelf and Mears general store. He gave Mears some bills from his wallet in payment. But Mears, having been told by others of the party that Packer had done time in Utah for counterfeiting, rejected one of them, whereupon Packer produced another wallet and more bills.

Mears caught a glimpse of a colored paper which he recognized as a Wells-Fargo money order, and his suspicions, already aroused, were heightened, because Packer had first claimed he was nearly broke and had sold a rifle to one of the Agency employees for ten dollars.

In the meantime, and only a few days after Packer had left the Agency, an Indian brought in some strips of meat and showed them to several persons.

"No deer. Not elk. Not mountain sheep," he said. "Tastes sweet. What is it?" He said he had found the meat in the bushes along the Pinos Creek trail, and when the Agency doctor was called in, his verdict was that it was from a human body.

General Adams stopped at Saguache en

[*Turn page*]


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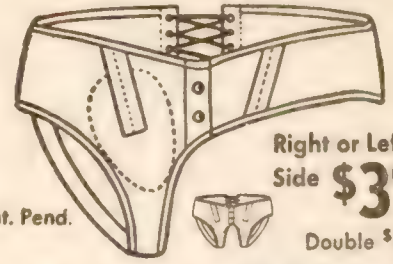

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route to the Agency and Mears told him of his suspicions that Packer had killed and robbed his companions, especially since word had been received from the San Juan that the other five men had not reached there.

Packer, after much urging, agreed to head a search party if General Adams would stand all expense. Accordingly, Mears, Packer and a couple of the original Utah party, including a man named Nutter, returned to the Agency.

Once there, General Adams confronted Packer with the evidence against him, accused him of murdering and robbing the others, and demanding the truth. Packer, thoroughly frightened, told a weird tale of horror. This time, it was that their provisions gave out in the first week after leaving the Indian camp and they struggled along in the snow for several days, living on roots and rosebuds, as they were unable to find any game at all. The old man, Swan, soon died, and the rest of the starving party ate some of his flesh to keep alive. Humphreys went next, by starvation. They finally reached a big lake and made camp.

Returning to camp after a short absence, Packer said, they found the others had killed Miller. That left three, Noon, Bell and Packer. By that time the "red-headed one," as Packer called Bell, was half crazy and he killed Noon with a hatchet. The only food available all this time was from the bodies of the dead men.

Packer claimed that he and Bell made a solemn bargain that they would not harm each other, come what might, but that when he was bending over the fire Bell struck at him with his rifle, which hit a tree and broke. Packer then shot Bell in self-defense, and it was some of his body, which Packer had carried with him on his journey, that the Indian had found in the willows where Packer had discarded it.

General Adams told Packer he did not believe a word of his story, but that, if it were true, the only way Packer could establish his veracity, and the extenuating circumstances surrounding his crime, was to locate their camp. Reluctantly, Packer agreed to guide a party under H. F. Lauter, a constable, to the scene.

After two weeks of fruitless search, probably deliberately misled by Packer, the party returned to the Agency. Packer, who had tried to knife Lauter on the trip, was turned over by the latter to the sheriff at Saguache,

from whose custody he soon escaped and left for parts unknown.

In August, the remains of the five men were discovered by John A. Randolph, a staff artist for Harper's Weekly, the famous illustrated paper of the day, who was on a tour of the Colorado mining camps. They were found in a grove of trees not far from Lake San Cristobal, which was where Packer had described it.

An inquest was held, the bodies identified by Nutter, and they were buried at the scene, where they now lie beneath a large boulder bearing a bronze plaque with their names and a brief story of their end.

Packer's whereabouts was unknown for nine years, until one of the original Utah party recognized his voice through a partition in a building at Fort Fetterman, Wyoming, in March, 1883. Taken into custody and brought back to Colorado by General Adams, by then a postoffice inspector, he made another confession, which was borne out to some extent by the evidence found on the ground nine years before.

In it, he said that upon his return to camp from a day spent hunting for food, he found Bell, who he said had acted crazy that morning, sitting by the fire eating a piece of roasted flesh. He said the bodies of the other four men were lying close by and that Miller's had been cut open. When he approached the fire, Bell got up and started for him, and Packer shot him from the side. Then he built the shelter already mentioned and stayed there until snow conditions allowed him to travel.

Packer was brought to trial at Lake City, the county seat of Hinsdale County, on March 28, 1883, convicted of premeditated murder and sentenced to be hanged. The jury was convinced that he, and he alone, had killed the entire party.

The case was taken to the Supreme Court of Colorado, who sent it back for retrial in 1885. The evidence was purely circumstantial, except for Packer's differing confessions, and the court questioned the hanging of anyone on such evidence. Feeling ran high against Packer in Hinsdale County, so the second trial was held at Gunnison in 1886, and Packer was sentenced to forty years in prison. After a great deal of newspaper pressure at the beginning of this century, Governor Thomas of Colorado paroled him, and he died April 24, 1907, on a ranch near Littleton, Colorado.


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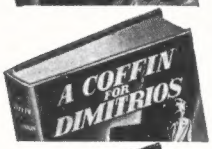

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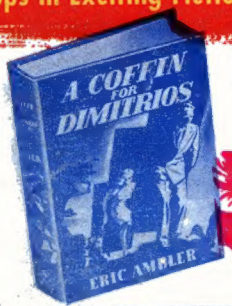


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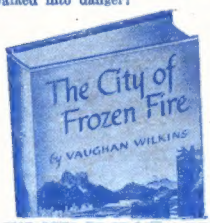


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